Youth Disrupted:
Impact of conflict and violent extremism on adolescents in northeast Syria

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About XCEPT

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Acronyms and terms

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
ACE	Adverse child experiences
CSO	Civil society organisation
Daesh	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
Global Coalition	The Global Coalition against Daesh
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key individual interview
NES	Northeast Syria
NSAGs	Non-state armed groups
PCVE	Preventing/countering violent extremism
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PSS	Psychosocial support
PYD	Kurdish Syrian Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
UNFPA	UN Population Fund
UNESCWA	UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia

Executive summary and introduction

Adolescents growing up in the regions of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in northeast Syria must navigate the typical adolescent challenges of physical, emotional, and psychological growth under conditions that are far from typical.[1] Cycles of violent conflict, including the 2011 uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Daesh) in 2014, have scarred a generation of Syrian youth, leaving them traumatised, vulnerable, and at risk of mobilisation to violence or other negative outcomes.[2]

This study explores the impact of a decade of conflict and violent extremism on adolescents in the northeast Syrian governorates of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, in order to inform efforts to support recovery and prevent resurgent violence and violent extremism. The research included qualitative and quantitative data collection in six communities in northeast Syria formerly held by Daesh, and interviews among key experts. The study was undertaken by the UK aid-funded Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (**XCEPT**) research programme.

To better understand the potential drivers of violence and sources of resilience among adolescents in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and identify opportunities for programming to support young people, the study sought to answer four overarching questions:

- How do conflict-related violence and instability affect the lives of adolescents?

- How does violent extremism affect the lives of adolescents?

- What key factors can drive or mitigate sympathy for, or active engagement with, Daesh among adolescents?

- What interventions can mitigate and prevent violent extremism among adolescents?

The field research showed that there was little support for Daesh or other forms of violent extremism among adolescents in the areas of northeast Syria studied, which excluded areas of heightened security risk stemming from continued Daesh activity. According to experts on Daesh and the conflict, the recruitment of youth by Daesh is not visible or widely reported in the region. Most study respondents claimed to be unaware of proactive Daesh recruitment, suggesting a change from the height of Daesh's power, when forced conscription and indoctrination of children were key features of the group's mobilisation efforts.[3]

The research showed, however, that a range of conflict impacts shape adolescents' lives and heighten vulnerability to violent

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1　For the purposes of this study, we use the term 'adolescents' to refer to young people aged 12-18.

2　Syrian adolescents face a range of potential negative outcomes arising from the conflict, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other manifestations of trauma, and vulnerability to violence, criminality, and drug abuse. The array of potential negative outcomes highlights the importance of addressing adolescents as victims of conflict and avoiding stigmatisation as potential violent extremists.

3　For more background on Daesh's conscription and indoctrination of children see, for instance: Gina Vale, ***Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory*** (London: ICSR, 2018); John G. Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter, 'From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 645-664; Jasmine M. El-Gamal and Hanny Megally, ***Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria*** (New York: NYU Center on International Cooperation and UNESCWA, 2021).

extremism and other negative outcomes at the individual, community, and structural levels in northeast Syria.

- **'Normalisation' of violence.** Cycles of violent conflict and the presence of armed actors have desensitised adolescents to violence in their communities. Guns are widespread and frequently used to resolve disputes – as well as occasionally in play – resulting in injury or death.

- **A worsening economic crisis and disrupted education limits options.** As their families struggle to make ends meet, adolescents increasingly are dropping out of school, disrupting their cognitive development and future pathways. Older boys, in particular, are leaving school, often for work; adolescent girls are being propelled into early marriage. Economic stressors and poor educational outcomes can shape adolescents' vulnerability to extremist exploitation, among other potential negative or violent pathways.

- **Lack of trust in governance contributes to a sense of marginalisation.** Adolescents' empowerment and their sense of agency or voice, such as through participation in local affairs, is stifled by an ineffective, ideologically driven governing structure that adolescents say feels imposed. Uneven recovery further divides and is a cause of grievance within communities. The areas most affected by the ongoing disruption of essential services or lack of access to international assistance correspond with those experiencing higher levels of Daesh activity and influence, where security risks persist.

- **Social cohesion has frayed.** The conflict has upended traditional sources of individual and community resilience. Adolescents' relationships with their families and peers have been strained by instability and displacement. The role of traditional sources of community cohesion – including tribes and religious leaders, and local officials and civil society – also has eroded. It is important to consider the influence of family, peer, and community networks in mitigating or enabling violent extremism among adolescents.

- **Trauma cuts across adolescent experience in the region.** Mental health challenges, compounded by a scarcity of psychosocial support services, undermine individual and communal resilience. Adolescents' adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) could increase their vulnerability to violent extremism but may not be a determining factor for engagement – a range of factors remain relevant.

- **A sense of uncertainty and diminished hope for the future.** The above challenges, alongside deteriorating security conditions (particularly in Deir ez-Zor) leave adolescents and adults alike feeling hopeless and adrift, unable to imagine or plan for a future beyond their current reality.

If unaddressed, these factors could undermine efforts toward stabilisation and recovery, and the prevention of violence and violent extremism in northeast Syria.

Donors should aim for holistic, multi-layered approaches that address the range of potential drivers and sources of resilience at the individual, community, and structural levels, taking into account the following top-level considerations for programmatic response:

- **Bespoke, locally grounded solutions** are key to mitigating the drivers of violent extremism, as these differ substantially between contexts, over time, and among individuals.

- **Avoid overtly framing activities as preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE)**. Labelling interventions as PCVE risks stigmatising or marginalising adolescent participants, prompting community backlash, or triggering Daesh reprisals.

- **Layered and complementary approaches are vital** to address the range of factors shaping adolescent vulnerability to violent extremism and resilience against it.

- **Longer-term, flexible programming** enables adaptation based on evidence and learning, including rapid scale-up where projects achieve success.

- **Address psychosocial support needs and empower adolescents.** While limitations on access to mental health and psychosocial support persist, engaging young people positively in their communities can build resilience and reduce the sense of powerlessness or grievance that extremists often seek to exploit.

- **Adopt a 'whole child' approach to programming.** It is vital to support the ecosystem surrounding the child, and avoid addressing a child's needs in isolation.

- **Design programming that empowers and gives agency to adolescents.** Giving adolescents a role in shaping activities intended to serve them – such as participation in programme adaptation – offers an opportunity for adolescents to make decisions, gain self-confidence, and control outcomes. This approach also increases the likelihood that assistance will be age- and gender-conscious, and tailored to the needs of adolescent participants.

1. Background and context

Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor buffeted by a decade of conflict

Northeast Syria – the region encompassing the governorates of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakeh, and parts of rural Aleppo – sits in a strategic location along the borders of Iraq and Turkey that is rich in natural resources, including oil and fertile agricultural land (Figure 1). Its population is largely Sunni and Arab, particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, but includes Kurds (who form a majority in al-Hasakeh) and other minorities. The Syrian regime spent decades politically and economically marginalising the region in favour of urban and coastal communities in Syria's west.[4] This created fertile ground for opposition to President Bashar al-Assad when the uprising began across Syria in 2011. Soon after it started, the Assad regime lost control over most of the area to an array of armed opposition groups.[5]

Adolescents in northeast Syria today were young children when the uprising against Assad began and when Daesh rose to power in 2014. Most cannot remember a time before the uprising, Daesh's brief but brutal rule, and the five-year military campaign (2014-2019)

Figure 1: Northeast Syria field data collection sites

Legend:
- Territory held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)
- AANES-held areas of Raqqa governorate
- AANES-held areas of Deir ez-Zor governorate

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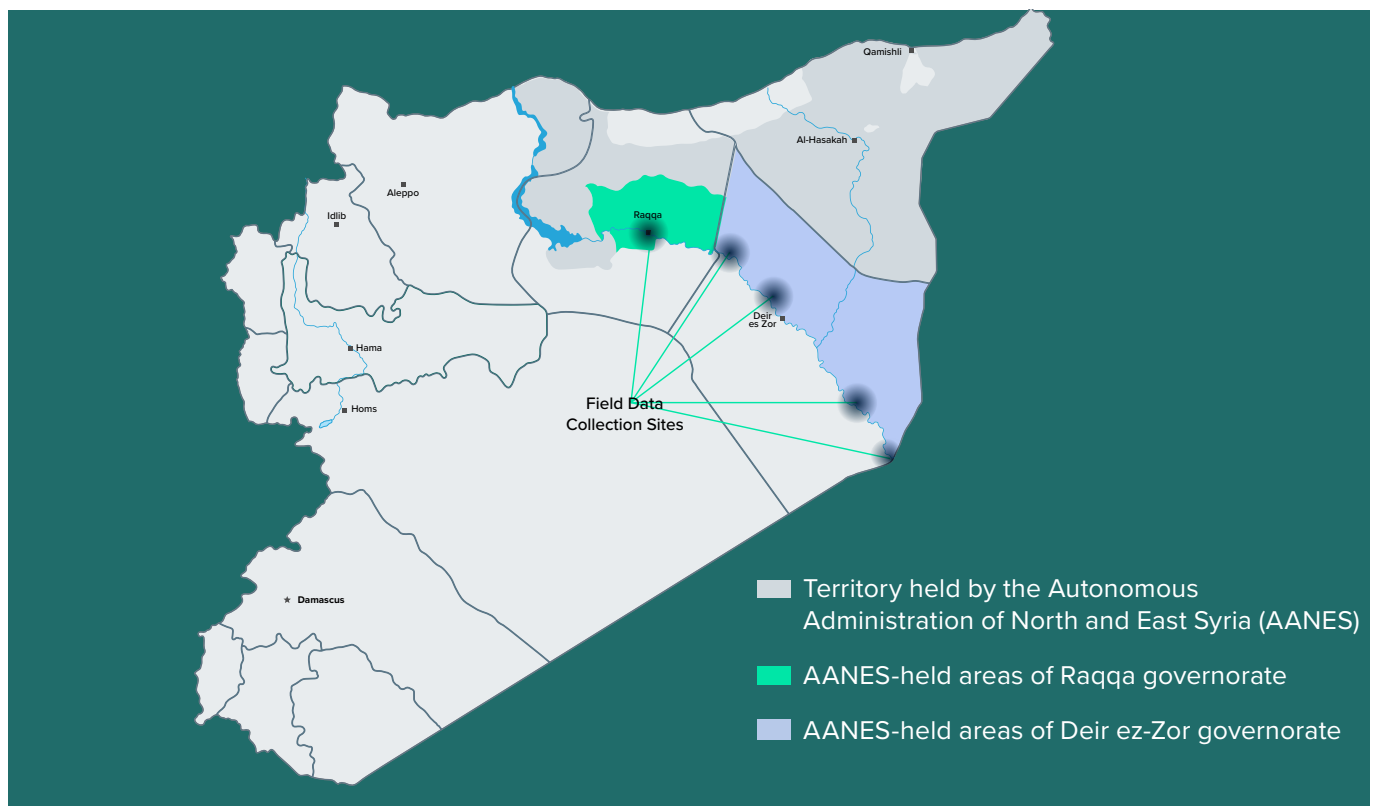
4   El-Gamal and Megally, *Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism*.

5   Ziad Awad, *The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players* (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2019).

against it by the Global Coalition Against Daesh[6] and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[7]

Daesh's approach to governance under its short-lived 'Caliphate' upended daily life. Provision of essential services (water, electricity, fuel, and bread) was accompanied by enforcement of an austere version of Islamic law, and exploitation of the education system as a means of youth indoctrination.[8,9,10]

The fight against Daesh caused widespread destruction, particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Most of the local population was displaced, primarily to safer locations within SDF-held territory. Some ended up at displaced persons camps, including al-Hol and Mahmoudli, particularly if they were suspected of affiliation with Daesh.[11] Returnees to Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor since Daesh's defeat include families alleged to have been affiliated with Daesh fighters. These families have been permitted to return through tribal sponsorship programmes but now face stigmatisation and other barriers to reintegration.[12]

The Syrian Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) controls most of the areas in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor formerly held by Daesh. Stabilisation and recovery efforts have been complicated by the disconnection of these

areas from neighbouring regions: the Turkish military and its Syrian allies control a swathe of northern Syria, with the aim of containing Syria's Kurds; the Assad regime holds sway over territory to the west and south and most of Syria beyond that; and frictions between the AANES and Iraq's Kurds limit eastward engagement across the Iraq border.

The governance and security approach of the AANES has amplified local tensions.[13] The AANES has established regional civil councils – mixed representative bodies including local and tribal delegates – that are perceived to be undermined by political operatives loyal to the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD).[14] Despite various attempts by the AANES to reform and restructure governance in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, accusations of Kurdish dominance and PYD influence persist.[15] Perceived lack of control by the Arab majority over decision-making aggravates longstanding Arab-Kurdish tensions.[16] Popular frustration over Kurdish-led governance is particularly acute in Deir ez-Zor, which has no native Kurdish community.[17]

Signs of Daesh resurgence, particularly in Deir-ez-Zor, signal a rising threat to stabilisation and increased potential risk of radicalisation among vulnerable groups.[18] Though support for the group's return

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6   The Global Coalition against Daesh was formed in September 2014 and consists of 85 members focused on countering Daesh on multiple fronts. See: **'Homepage'**, *Global Coalition*, accessed September 8, 2022.

7   The SDF, an alliance between the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Arab-majority armed opposition groups, is the Global Coalition's primary partner in the fight against Daesh.

8   Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, *Middle East Security Report 22: ISIS Governance in Syria* (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2014).

9   El-Gamal and Megally, ***Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism.***

10   Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

11   James A. Schear et al., ***Stabilizing Eastern Syria After ISIS***, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).

12   El-Gamal and Megally, ***Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism***.

13   Justice for Life and Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Deir ez-Zor: Dozens Arbitrarily Arrested during SDF's "Deterrence of Terrorism" Campaign* (Justice for Life and Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2020).

14   UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), ***Mapping Local Governance in Syria: A Baseline Study*** (Beirut: UNESCWA, 2020); El-Gamal and Megally, ***Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism***.

15   Will Christou, '**The Autonomous Administration launches new reforms to placate tribal elements**', *Syria Direct*, November 29, 2020, accessed April 11, 2022.

16   El-Gamal and Megally, ***Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism.***

17   Interview, technical expert (#2), Oct-Nov 2021.

18   Hassan Hassan, '**ISIS in Iraq and Syria: Rightsizing the Current 'Comeback''**, *Newlines Institute*, May 12, 2020, accessed April 11, 2022.

appears to be minimal, intimidation and extortion increase its sway.[19] The legacy of Daesh indoctrination also raises concerns over adolescent susceptibility to its extremist message. Heavy-handed security tactics by the SDF and local security forces – including forced conscription, arbitrary arrest, and the excessive use of force – further heighten friction with local communities,[20] without halting the criminal activities (looting, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and drug abuse) that leave many local residents feeling insecure.[21]

Crime in northeast Syria reflects both the extent to which the war economy has become embedded during ten years of conflict and deepening economic stresses. The Syrian pound, the official currency of the state, remains in use in AANES-controlled territory. Its value has dropped significantly since late 2019, due in part to continued sanctions on the regime and the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon. The currency depreciation has more than doubled the cost of essential food items for Syrians, precipitating what international aid organisations have described as the worst humanitarian situation in the country since the conflict began.[22]

Residents of AANES-controlled areas are hit particularly hard, given disruptions in trade with Turkey and the Kurdish region of Iraq.[23] The concentration of international assistance in urban areas**,** largely for reasons of security and efficiency, further marginalises rural communities most at risk from resurgent violent extremism.[24] Economic hardship forces many adolescents to leave school prematurely, either due to the cost burden of education or the need to support their families. However,

high unemployment limits their opportunities severely, further deepening socio-economic divides.

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19   Although we focus on Daesh resurgence in this study, potential splinter groups or other violent extremist actors could pose similar risks.

20   Justice For Life and Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Deir ez-Zor: Dozens Arbitrarily Arrested*.

21   Hussam Jazmati et al., ***Aftershocks: The legacy of ISIS in Syria*** (Berlin: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development, 2021).

22   Hussein Chokr, '**Mapping the Depreciation of the Syrian Lira**', *London School of Economics and Political Science*, April 1, 2021, accessed April 11, 2022; Security Council Report, '**December 2021 Monthly Forecast'** (New York: Security Council Report, 2021).

23   Syria Independent Monitoring (SIM), *Understanding Market Drivers in Syria* (Syria Independent Monitoring, 2018).

24   COAR Global, **Countering Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation in North-east Syria: Challenges for Local Organisations and Opportunities for Donors** (COAR Global, 2022).
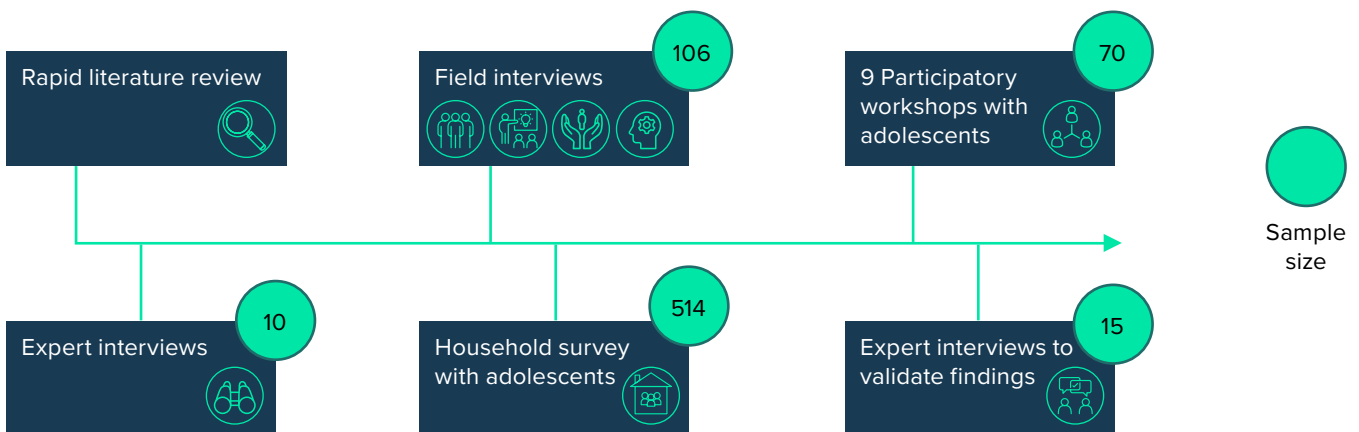
2. Data collection methodology

The XCEPT research team collaborated with Abc Advisory Company and its Syrian field partner, Mari for Development, to undertake qualitative and quantitative field data collection in six locations of northeast Syria. The field research focused on data collection among adolescents and adults engaged with youth aged 12-18. Data was collected between August and December 2021.

The **mixed-methods data collection** (Figure 2) included: a rapid literature review; key individual interviews (KIIs) with experts on violent extremism, stabilisation programming, and education in Syria; field interviews with community leaders, civil society organisation (CSO) representatives, parents, and teachers; participatory workshops with adolescents; and a face-to-face household survey among adolescents.[25] These methods were sequenced to allow qualitative data collection to inform the quantitative survey. All data from both qualitative and quantitative methods was anonymised to protect the identity of respondents and uphold ethical standards.

Six locales were selected for the field data collection in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates. Site selection was guided by considerations related to: accessibility for research; inclusion of both rural and urban areas; varied levels of donor and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) presence; and prior experience of Daesh control. These factors were assessed in consultation with the experts interviewed and through open-source information.

Due to security and accessibility concerns, the research team was unable to collect data in areas at higher risk of violent extremist activity. The chosen locations were split between those assessed to have either medium or low levels of violent extremist activity (Figure 3).[26] To support comparison, the research team conducted 10 remote interviews among community leaders, teachers and CSO representatives in areas of eastern Deir ez-Zor experiencing higher levels of violent extremist activity (Buseyra, Sh'heil, and Dhiban).

Figure 2: Mixed methods research design

Rapid literature review

Field interviews — 106

9 Participatory workshops with adolescents — 70

Sample size

Expert interviews — 10

Household survey with adolescents — 514

Expert interviews to validate findings — 15

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25   Data collection involving minors conformed with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) associated guidelines. This included obtaining informed consent from both the caregiver as well as the minor in an adapted, age-appropriate manner.

26   These categories were determined based on available evidence regarding the frequency of Daesh attacks, the level of reported Daesh activity, and popular attitudes toward and the group.

Figure 3: Field site selection criteria

Field site selection criteria					
Area	Site	Accessibility	Location type (urban/rural)	INGO presence	VE activity level
Raqqa City	Meshlab	Highly Accessible	Peri-Urban	Limited	Medium
	al-Thakana	Highly Accessible	Urban	High	Low
Deir ez-Zor West	Mheimideh	Highly Accessible	Rural	Medium	Low
	Jizrat al-Buhmeid	Accessible	Rural	Low	Medium
Deir ez-Zor East	Baghouz	Accessible	Rural	Very low	Medium
	Sheitat	Accessible	Rural	Low	Low

Four sites were selected in Deir ez-Zor governorate (Figure 4). **Baghouz village and the Sheitat area (a cluster of villages) in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor** are in an area that is historically marginalised and deprived of basic services. Baghouz, the site of Daesh's last stand against the Global Coalition, was chosen for its proximity to the Iraq border, and the high level of destruction caused during the fight against Daesh. Sheitat, in contrast, is known as an area of opposition to Daesh, in part due to a massacre of local tribe members by Daesh during its period of control.

Jizrat al-Buhmeid and Mheimideh villages in western Deir ez-Zor are in marginalised areas but are better supported by services and INGO presence. Vulnerability to Daesh is viewed

Figure 4: Deir ez-Zor sites
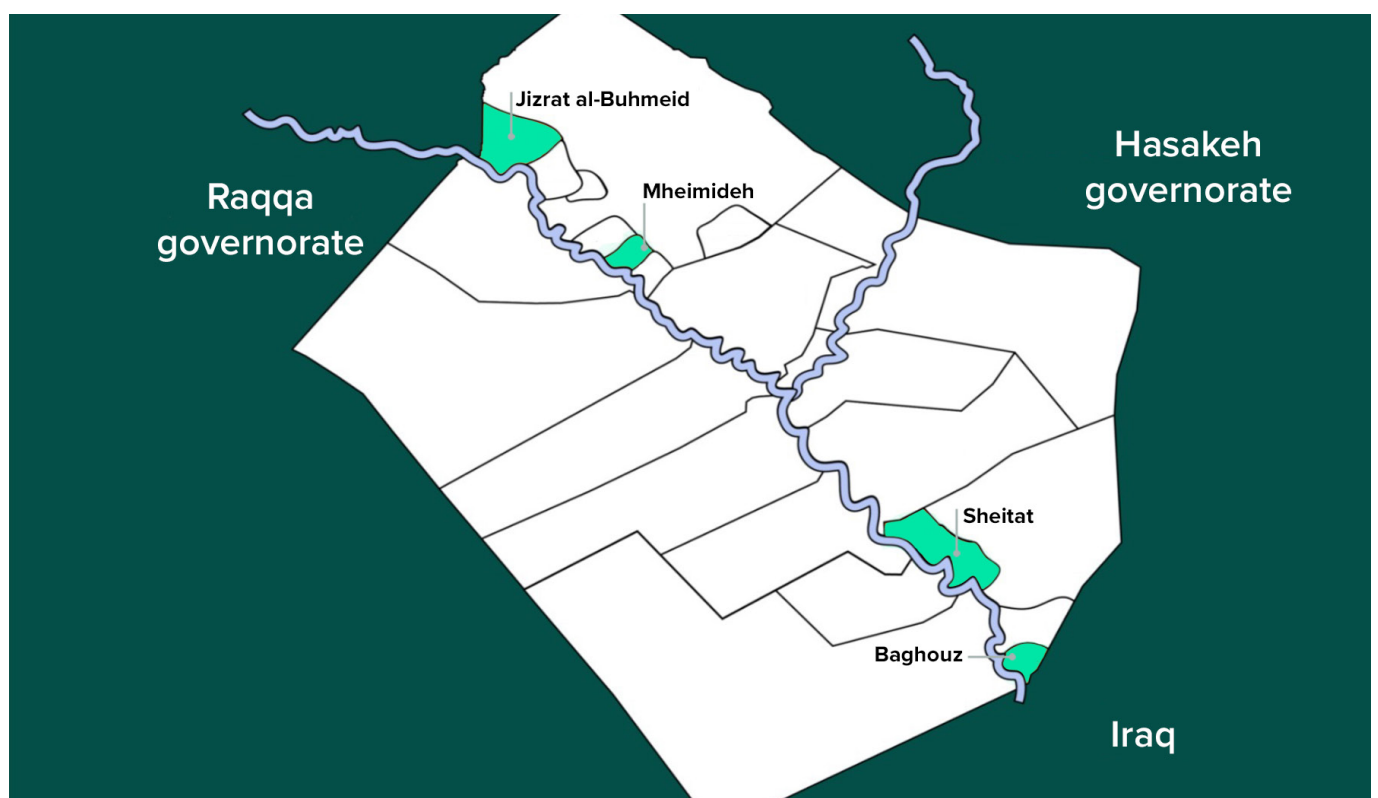
as lower than in eastern Deir ez-Zor, except among IDPs residing in informal settlements. These families lack access to education and employment opportunities for adolescents in comparison to host communities.

Raqqa governorate has been less affected by recent Daesh activity than Deir ez-Zor. Due to higher levels of donor assistance in Raqqa City and surrounding areas, issues related to marginalisation, deprivation, and susceptibility to violent extremism are less prominent.

To offer comparison with the more rural areas of Deir ez-Zor, **two neighbourhoods were chosen in Raqqa City** (Figure 5). The area commonly known as **Meshlab** sits on the outskirts of Raqqa City and is not as well serviced as central neighbourhoods. The population comprises migrants from the countryside who came to the city before the war. Meshlab also hosts a high concentration

of internally displaced people (IDPs). **Al-Thakana**, in central Raqqa City, is well-serviced and comprised mostly of urban residents of relatively high socio-economic standing.

Qualitative data collection included semi-structured interviews among adults (106 total – 60 male and 46 female)[27] and nine participatory workshops with adolescents (70 total – 40 male and 30 female) identified through purposive sampling.[28] The workshop participants were grouped by age (12-14 and 15-18) and by gender for older adolescents, apart from one mixed-gender workshop for 15- to 18-year-olds in Raqqa City.[29] Participants included a mix of residents, returnees, and IDPs – plus one workshop held solely with recent adolescent male returnees from al-Hol camp. The workshops employed bespoke, conflict- and trauma-sensitive exercises to encourage participants to share details about their lives, experiences, opinions, and values.[30]

Figure 5: Raqqa City sites

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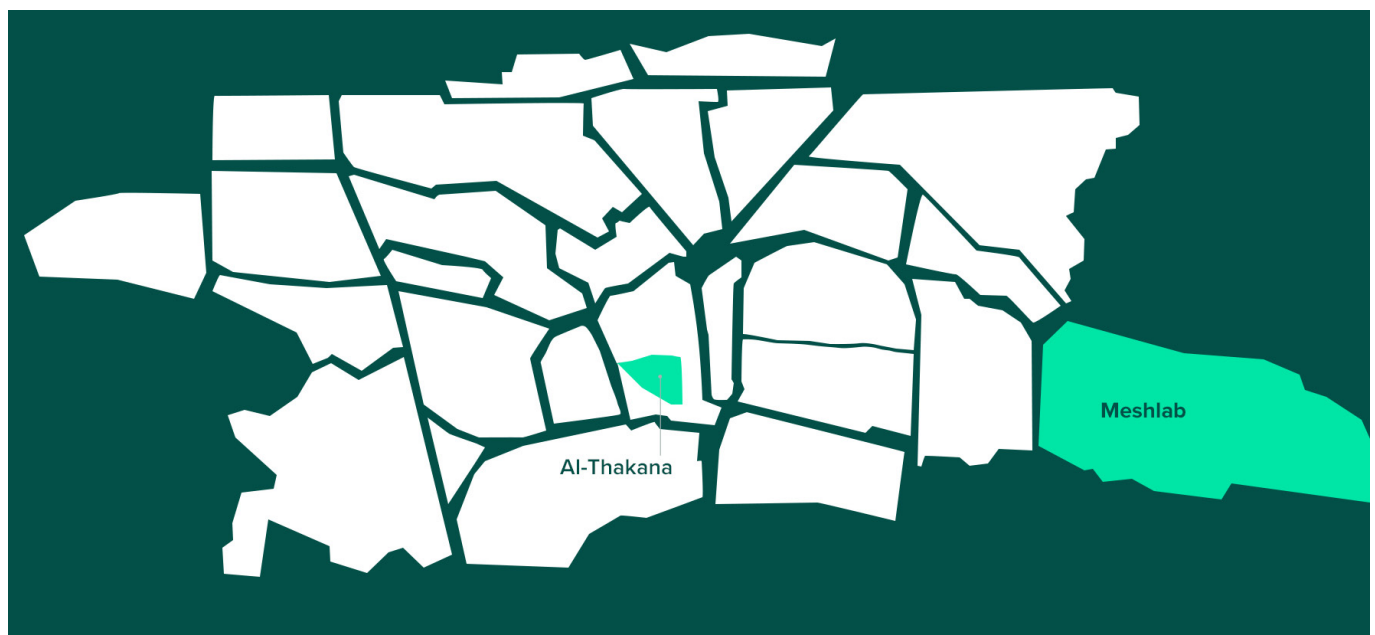
27   Interviews included the following respondents from each of the six locations: four community leaders; four CSO representatives; four teachers/educators; and four parents or caregivers.

28   Participatory workshops were designed in response to pilot data collection among adolescents, which yielded limited data through qualitative interviews. Adolescents showed reluctance to engage and offered only brief responses in interviews. The presence of parents or other adults also appeared to constrain responses.

29   Due to local social and cultural taboos, mixing genders between older adolescents was not permissible.

30   Workshops began with icebreaker activities, followed by a 'lifeline' exercise in which adolescents were asked to draw a timeline of significant events in their lives. These exercises helped to draw out adolescent views on their current situations and hopes and expectations for the future.

The **face-to-face household survey** of 514 adolescents was conducted in December 2021. Due to the absence of a reliable census or other population data for northeast Syria, the research team was unable to apply standard random sampling techniques, and instead relied on a bespoke approach. The 'random walk' method was used to select households, and a modified Kish grid was applied to randomly select respondents ages 12-18 within households. The overall response rate was 77%, deemed typical for the region.[31] Annex A provides more details on the survey methodology.

Field data collection was informed by 25 KIIs with experts and practitioners with recent programming experience in the region. Expert interviews were conducted both before and after field data collection, to inform tool design and help validate findings.

Limitations in field data collection

Initial piloting of both qualitative and quantitative data collection raised important issues that informed final data collection and introduced some limitations on data gathered. In addition to the above-mentioned security risks, which prevented access to areas of higher violent extremist activity, limitations to the field research included:

- **Challenges of data collection on sensitive issues.** Research on sensitive topics, such as violent extremism, faces particular challenges. Respondents may withhold or provide misleading information to avoid perceived threats. They may offer skewed information or opinion presented as 'fact' because they are ill-informed or cannot recall events, want to be viewed favourably by the interviewer ('social desirability bias'),

or seek to discredit others.[32] To mitigate this, enumerators carefully explained the study, used neutral language, included follow-up questions, and sought to make the respondents as comfortable as possible.

- **The need to avoid explicit reference to Daesh.** During piloting of the quantitative survey, the team encountered high non-response rates on Daesh-related questions, likely in part due to fear of association with the group or fear of being targeted. Furthermore, broader concerns were raised around conflict trauma and security risks to both respondents and researchers. Participatory workshops offered a forum through which researchers could more directly address Daesh-related topics with adolescents.

- **Potential bias introduced by the presence of family members:** Parents or guardians of adolescent respondents often were present during the face-to-face survey (81% of surveys).[33] Enumerators noted that some adolescents appeared nervous in front of family members or required help in responding, particularly when discussing violence and Daesh. To mitigate this challenge, researchers emphasised the anonymous nature of the survey and offered adolescents a non-response option.

- **Pandemic limitations on in-person gatherings:** Due to COVID-19 restrictions, participatory workshops only became viable near the end of the data collection period. Due to the limited time available, participants from Raqqa City and western Deir ez-Zor were each brought together into the same workshops.

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31   Although a margin of error cannot be calculated for the full survey, the margin of error was calculated for each survey site and ranged from 9.1-11.2%.

32   James Khalil, 'A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists', Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 42, no. 4 (2019): 429-443.

33   The presence of family members during the survey was higher among female respondents (91% of interviews versus 72% for male adolescents) and among younger respondents (88% of interviews among those ages 12-14 versus 75% for 15-18-year-olds).

3. Theoretical framing

A central objective of the research was to identify potential drivers of, and sources of resilience against, violent extremism among adolescents. There is, however, no single theoretical frame to explain what propels individuals and groups toward violent extremism.[34] Active support or engagement with violent extremism results from a confluence of political, social, economic, psychological, ideational, and other 'variables' that differ according to context, among individuals, and over time.[35]

To help frame the research, this study applies an adapted version of the Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model of violent extremism developed by James Khalil (a co-author of this study), John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen.[36] At the heart of this model lies the distinction between sympathy for ideologically justified violence (attitudes) and direct involvement in its creation (behaviours). The ABC model also guides examination of the **drivers of violent extremism in northeast Syria** within three broad categories:

- **'Structural motivators'**, or contextual factors, that shape the environment and lives of respondents. In northeast Syria, field data collection indicated that **weak governance, dire economic conditions, inefficient service delivery, insecurity, and repression** emerged as key factors that, if unaddressed, could propel resurgent violent extremism among adolescents.

- **'Individual incentives'** refer to both positive and negative influences at the personal level that may drive participation in violent extremism. In northeast Syria, individual incentives have shifted in relative weight and importance among adolescents since Daesh's territorial defeat. **Material rewards, revenge, and ideology** appear to carry more weight now than the desire for status, power, or protection, which may have been more relevant at the height of Daesh's power.

- **'Enabling factors'** facilitate or channel sympathy for and engagement in violent extremism. For adolescents in northeast Syria, these factors can include **social connections** (the role of family and peer networks in radicalisation and/or recruitment) and **online spaces**. It also can include **cognitive factors**, such as poor critical thinking skills or limited individual awareness of the potential consequences of one's actions.

'Resilience' to violent extremism likewise is a multi-faceted concept and can be viewed in myriad ways. It can refer to the ability to 'bounce back' from adversity, to adapt to hardship in ways that help overcome it, or to a 'shield' that helps protects individuals or communities from misfortune.[37] This study applies the definition of 'resilience' developed by Ami C. Carpenter: "the ability to rebound, maintain, or strengthen functioning during and after a disturbance, or to cope successfully in the face of extreme adversity or risk".[38] The study explores what supports **resilience among adolescents in northeast Syria at the community level,** building on

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34 For the purposes of this research, we limit the study of 'violent extremism' to sympathy for or active engagement with Daesh in northeast Syria.

35 See, for instance, Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2009).

36 James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, **'The Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism'**, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2022): 425-450, accessed 21 July 2022.

37 William Stephens and Stijn Sieckelinck, 'Being Resilient to Radicalisation in PVE Policy: A Critical Examination', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13, no. 1 (2020): 142-165.

38 Ami C. Carpenter, *Community Resilience to Sectarian Violence in Baghdad* (New York: Springer, 2014), 4.

Carpenter's identification of the key factors underpinning community resilience in Baghdad: social capital, information flow and open communication, economic resources, and 'community competence' (e.g. decision-making processes and pathways for collective action).[39]

The research also focuses on adolescent **resilience at the individual level,** considering factors such as 'cognitive resources' (e.g. the ability to appreciate the consequences of one's actions), character traits, values, and identity.[40]

Given the multiplicity of variables that can influence vulnerability to and resilience against violent extremism, this study employed the above-mentioned theoretical models as guiding frames for analysis, while allowing key themes to emerge from the field data.[41] The research seeks to strike a balance between analysing individual and community level factors and the broader structural or contextual forces that propel continued conflict or violent extremism. Examining potential risk factors at multiple levels is intended to help avoid the pitfall whereby programme interventions aimed at strengthening resilience at the local or individual level are undercut by the negative effects of ongoing political exclusion, repression, and economic deprivation.[42] Tackling violent extremism from both directions – bottom-up (individual and group factors) and top-down (structural and contextual factors) – is critical.

Throughout the report, we will highlight factors within each of the above categories that the data and literature suggest pose a potential increased risk of vulnerability to – or bolster resilience against – violent

extremism among adolescents. We rely on the icons below to mark these potential risk and resilience factors.

 Structural motivator

 Individual incentives

 Enabling factor

 Resilience factor

39   Ibid, 6.

40   William Stephens, Stijn Sieckelinck, and Hans Boutellier, 'Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44, no. 4 (2021): 346-361.

41   A priori codes were used to facilitate analysis of the data.

42   Stephens and Sieckelinck, 'Being Resilient', 145.

4. Perceptions of and engagement with violent extremism

This section summarises respondent views of Daesh and reflections from the field data on current Daesh activity. The field research revealed largely negative perceptions of Daesh and low levels of engagement with the group in the communities studied, providing a lens through which to interpret the relevance of potential drivers of violent extremism and sources of resilience against it.

Adolescent views of Daesh should be assessed in light of the limitations on data collection arising from security and conflict sensitivity considerations. The research team could not openly query adolescent survey respondents about Daesh, and participatory workshops needed to be handled with extreme care: adolescent participants often became visibly upset recounting this period of their lives.

In total, 35 of 70 adolescent workshop participants were willing to discuss Daesh; among these, only 17 were willing to discuss the issue in some depth. Adult interviewees – including parents, teachers, and community members engaged with youth – were more open in sharing their views and discussing the perceived impact of Daesh on adolescents. Together, these views offer insights into perceptions of Daesh, and the conditions under which the group could rebuild strength. However, the limits on data collection require caution in extrapolating from these findings.

4.1 Daesh's harsh tactics leave lasting imprint, especially on girls

Twenty-six of the 35 adolescent workshop participants who were willing to discuss Daesh spoke negatively of the group, and views among adults were almost uniformly negative. Adolescents' remarks centred around the group's harsh punishments and repression.

Adolescent girls rejected Daesh and their legacy in much stronger terms than boys. Participants in two female-only workshops (for ages 15 to 18) in Deir ez-Zor were uniformly critical of Daesh. Girls from eastern Deir ez-Zor noted the trauma engendered by the loss of family members and Daesh's harsh punishments, and the community's joy when the group was forced out.[43] Participants in a western Deir ez-Zor workshop recalled the terror of seeing corpses displayed in the streets.[44] The *hesba* [religious police] helped perpetuate a climate of fear, stopping women and girls not entirely covered from head to toe. Three respondents relayed how their relatives were flogged and forced to attend religious courses because of their dress.[45] As a result, many girls rarely ventured out; one respondent recalled being "buried at home".

> "People hate the group because they had to leave their houses, their kids were displaced, [and] we lost everything. Even those who returned had to start from scratch. They [children] lost their future as schools were

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43   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

44   Workshop, boys/girls aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

45   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

> *closed by the dawla [Daesh]. No one wants them back."*
> - **Adolescent girl, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

> *rules ... they were considered good by some and bad by others."*
> - **Adolescent boy, Raqqa**

Some girls taking part in mixed gender workshops offered more positive reflections. During a workshop for those aged 12-14 in western Deir ez Zor, a girl asserted that Daesh "taught us morals ... implemented Sharia and provided security".[46] During a workshop for 15- to 18-year-olds in Raqqa City, a girl mentioned improved economic conditions under Daesh and the group's pressure on the community to act "morally" – while also observing that women and girls were more empowered after Daesh's defeat.[47]

These boys' reflections on Daesh's positive impact largely centred on the perception that working conditions, services, and security were more stable under Daesh.[48] The returnees from al-Hol also noted the group's implementation of Sharia and appeared to ascribe the misfortunes of northeast Syria to a turn away from Daesh. One boy noted "we do not even receive rain because of the huge amount of sins committed", referring to alleged corruption within the AANES governing authority.[49]

> *"Everything was available [under Daesh's rule], including jobs and services. Even the value of the currency was better. Now there are no jobs."*
> - **Adolescent boy, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

> *"Copying Daesh's style is still widespread among adolescents. That includes the watch, the ring, the headband, songs, and hymns. They also shorten their trousers to the same length instructed by Daesh. Whether they know it or not, they are still identifying with Daesh's identity and norms."*
> - **Teacher, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Among the adolescent boys willing to openly discuss Daesh and its legacy (15 of 70 workshop participants), seven cited positive views. This included three boys participating in a workshop for male returnees from al-Hol camp, whose experience of life after Daesh has been marked by extreme hardship. It also included boys living in eastern Deir ez Zor and Raqqa City. Only two cited ongoing support for Daesh among their age group.

The remaining eight adolescents willing to discuss Daesh criticised the group and cited positive developments since its fall, such as improvements in the economy, the opening of schools, and increased freedom of movement, in particular for women.[50] Multiple participants in a western Deir ez-Zor workshop also pointed to the greater availability of humanitarian aid since Daesh's ousting.[51]

A participant in a western Deir ez-Zor workshop for older adolescents claimed he was flogged and jailed by Daesh at the age of

> *"I was badly behaved and reckless. I used to pick up fights all the time. But that all changed after they [Daesh] ruled the city. The main good thing about them is that they forced people to become disciplined and follow the*

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46   Workshop, boys/girls aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.
47   Workshop, boys/girls aged 12-14, Raqqa City, Nov-Dec 2021.
48   Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.
49   Workshop, boys aged 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021.
50   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.
51   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

14, and that his head was shaved because he did not have a beard and because his trousers were deemed too tight. Another participant said Daesh ran over his cousin, and that his uncle was flogged because his beard was too short.[52]

4.2 Adults more outspoken on critique of Daesh

Adults were more open to discussing Daesh. 67 of the 106 adult interviewees shared their opinions, with roughly half (54) offering negative views. Their comments centred on the suffering caused to local communities at the hands of Daesh, due the group's harsh strictures and unjust punishments – which they sought to justify via a misrepresentation of Islam.[53] Interviewees in all locales recalled the difficulties of life under Daesh, sharing community perceptions and, at times, personal experiences. One community leader from western Deir-ez Zor relayed that she had not heard from her husband since he was taken by Daesh in 2016, "leaving [her] as the sole breadwinner and person responsible for her children and home".[54]

> *"They [Daesh] ruled by force. People were not happy with their ideology and way of life … Adolescents in particular resent the group because of all the suffering they had to go through as a result of Daesh and the fight against it."*
>
> **- Community leader, Raqqa**

> *"They would cut people's hands off or imprison people and say they were implementing Sharia, but they were doing the opposite."*
>
> **- Community leader, western Deir ez-Zor**

Eight of the 106 interviewees (8%) expressed more mixed feelings towards Daesh, including a community leader from Raqqa who acknowledged the community had suffered but believed economic and security conditions were better under the group.[55] Only five adult interviewees (5%) held positive overall views of Daesh and, again, these largely revolved around perceptions of increased security and improved economic conditions under Daesh.[56] One community leader from Raqqa recalled that marketplaces in Raqqa were bustling when Daesh held the city.[57]

> *"Some people liked the group [Daesh] because of the security it provided and because of the implementation of Sharia. Others hated the group because of the hesba [religious police] and its brutality."*
>
> **- Civil society member, Raqqa**

4.3 Few reports of active Daesh recruitment

Most respondents claimed to be unaware of proactive Daesh recruitment. However, insights from those who cite active Daesh recruitment are important, even if they represent only a fraction of the sample. These respondents could be better informed, and others may have avoided the topic due to security fears or other

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52   Ibid.

53   Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; KII, community leader (#2), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021.

54   Interview, community leader (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

55   Interview, community leader (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

56   Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

57   Interview, community leader (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

concerns.[58] In any case, if recruitment is actively occurring today, it is happening on a smaller and more covert scale than previously.

> *"Daesh is rejected in here. Our neighbourhood has the least number of people who joined Daesh in the past. That also explains why Daesh is not currently able to recruit adolescents in our area."*
> **- Civil society member, Raqqa**

All adolescent workshop participants said they were unaware of Daesh trying to recruit their peers during the past year.[59,60] They also said that they were unaware of anyone their age who had voluntarily joined the group after its defeat.

Nearly all adults (96%) claimed to be unaware of current recruitment efforts.[61] Some asserted that Daesh faced greater difficulty in gaining traction among local residents.[62] A parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor stressed that Daesh "cannot approach me or other adults because we understand the risks and we could also report them", adding that "they also cannot just approach children because they might reveal their identity".[63] A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor said "the group's defeat made it less attractive to locals, who … are [now] joining the Self-Administration".[64]

Among the few adults who said that recruitment still occurs among adolescents, a teacher from western Deir ez-Zor was the only one to provide a recent example:

> A 16-year-old boy recently came to my school wanting to enrol. During our chat, he told me that he was imprisoned in Raqqa for being tasked by the group to drop a bomb in Raqqa. He [had been] captured before he carried out the attack, so he [had] not stayed in jail for a very long time.[65]

The lack of concrete examples offered by respondents suggests the insights shared on recent Daesh recruitment may be speculative.[66] For example, a community leader from an area in which Daesh has had difficulty gaining traction noted limited local support for the group but claimed it is mobilising adolescents elsewhere, saying "all the attacks carried out [in other areas] are done by youths".[67] Similarly, a teacher from eastern Deir ez-Zor claimed that "the group has been able to recruit and create sleeper cells in our area" but offered few details.[68]

> *"Daesh recruitment is no longer a concern for us. Losing control over the area has limited the group's ability to move and recruit people. Adolescents are also busy with many things,*

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58 Eight respondents discussed active Daesh recruitment: four experts (three of whom visit the region regularly) and four adult interviewees living in the region.

59 Due to the high risk of stigmatisation, re-traumatisation, and possible retaliation by the security forces (or fear thereof), researchers did not explicitly ask boys in the workshop for returnees from al-Hol camp for examples of Daesh recruitment.

60 Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls/boys aged 12-14, Raqqa City, Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021.

61 Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

62 Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

63 Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021.

64 Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

65 Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

66 Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

67 Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

68 KII, teacher (#3), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021.

including feeding their families, which [has] distracted them from the group and its activities."

- **Teacher, western Deir ez-Zor**

The limited observations that people shared on Daesh activity centred on the potential for the group to reach adolescents through social media and social connections.[69] Since the group's territorial defeat, online spaces reportedly have become a more active arena for the group to maintain influence. Charlie Winter and Haid Haid (an author of this study) describe how Daesh has continued to disseminate its propaganda – including videos covering their attacks, religious lectures, and preaching material – through its media channels and accounts, which is then shared by supporters on Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other platforms.[70]

Four adolescent workshop participants cited the continued influence of online content among their peers.[71] A community leader from western Deir ez-Zor discussed Daesh's use of WhatsApp, Facebook or Telegram to "befriend them [adolescents] online to spread their ideas".[72] Three adults (a teacher and two civil society workers) noted that Daesh's songs and hymns remain available online and continue to stir emotions.[73]

"Daesh's engagement with adolescents is limited to social media. The group's videos are usually shared by local media influencers close to the group, who are paid to spread

the material in their networks. Eventually, adolescents come across these visual materials. Some of them watch them, while others do not."

- **Civil society member, Raqqa**

A civil society worker from Raqqa noted the particular risk arising from the amount of time adolescents spend online, frequently without parental oversight.[74] A parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor expressed concern regarding pro-active efforts by Daesh to connect with those who 'like' or share their materials online. A mother from western Deir ez-Zor noted changes in her 14-year-old son's behaviour after watching pro-Daesh YouTube channels.[75] She lamented her son's increased tendency to point to a lack of accountability and rampant corruption within the governing authorities and society at large, which he says was not a feature of life under Daesh.

4.4 Experts see Daesh operating cautiously

One expert argued that Daesh currently relies on existing members versus new recruits. He maintained that Daesh members who are arrested by the SDF are often veteran operatives who become active again upon their release.[76] Similarly, an expert on Daesh in Syria suggested that the group was not actively recruiting because its current priority is "to retain old supporters, [and] keep them

69   Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; KII, teacher (#3), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

70   Charlie Winter and Haid Haid, ***Jihadist Propaganda, Offline: Strategic Communications in Modern Warfare***, (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2018); Interview, parent (#1), Deir Ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

71   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

72   Interview, community leader (#1), Deir Ez-Zor (West) Oct-Nov 2021.

73   Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

74   Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

75   Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West) Oct-Nov 2021.

76   Interview, technical expert (#2), Oct-Nov 2021.

kind of interested and active".[77] A recent study of Daesh in Syria notes that concerns of potential infiltration and compromise impede the group's recruitment efforts.[78]

Echoing expert and research findings, a development practitioner working with young people in Raqqa said his organisation was unaware of Daesh recruitment among youth during the past year.[79] Another development worker stated: "we could not find any current information that young people in Raqqa are actively being recruited to armed groups. And we didn't really see that in Deir ez-Zor either".[80]

> "Daesh's principal concern right now is not having its networks identified and then dismantled by the SDF. As a result, the group has been exceptionally cautious. That is evident in the limited scale of its operations, which suggests that it is trying to keep as low a profile as possible … It makes complete sense that the recruitment is on the covert side of things, and among the trusted and vetted individuals … That is the only thing that could keep ISIS remnants safe."
>
> **- Daesh expert**

Conversely, one northeast Syria specialist claimed that Daesh cannot depend as much on existing affiliates because so many have been killed, imprisoned, or are in hiding.[81] He also observed that adolescent operatives are frequently used for logistical tasks, such as transporting equipment, rather than being recruited as 'members'. Although three other experts made similar observations regarding how Daesh uses adolescents, none offered details,[82] and it is difficult to confirm whether

adolescents are aware on whose behalf they carry out such tasks.

> "They're not relying as much on former affiliates, because former affiliates already got killed or [are] in prison or under the radar … But it has been very hard to eliminate them [Daesh] because they are relying on new elements. And whenever I visit the field, I talk to local security leaders who are involved in anti-Daesh campaigns. And every time they just prove the same, like they're talking about young guys – 19, 18, 15, and sometimes little children, age 10 or nine – collaborating with the group."
>
> **- Northeast Syria specialist**

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77 Interview, technical expert (#23), Oct-Nov 2021.

78 Hossam Jazmati, 'Paper IV: Extremist Groups Approach Toward Social Structures', in Hossam Jazmati et al., ***Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria*** (Berlin: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development, 2021).

79 Interview, technical expert (#9), Oct-Nov 2021.

80 Interview, technical expert (#8), Oct-Nov 2021.

81 Interview, technical expert (#7), Oct-Nov 2021.

82 Interview, technical expert (#17), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#22), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#16), Oct-Nov 2021.

5. Taking stock of a decade of conflict and violent extremism on adolescent lives

The Syrian adolescents at the heart of this study have come of age amid instability and conflict. Most cannot remember a time before the outbreak of violence in 2011 and Daesh's rise in 2014. These conditions have transformed daily life in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, suffusing the ordinary elements of childhood and adolescence – school, family life, friendships – with hardship and trauma, and influencing young people's prospects and outlook.

This section examines the ways in which the conflict and Daesh have affected adolescents' daily lives and communities. The following section (Section 6) looks at the conflict's toll on adolescent wellbeing and relationships with their families, peers and communities. In both Sections 5 and 6, we consider the range of factors that may shape adolescent vulnerability to or resilience against violent extremism.[83]

Despite reductions in conflict violence since Daesh's fall, violence has increasingly become normalised within society, including through conscription, criminality, or as a means to resolve disputes. A lingering, rising threat from Daesh – particularly in Deir ez-Zor – is renewing fears of the group's return, alongside suspicion and resentment among adolescents and their families of heavy-handed SDF tactics to suppress it.

The AANES has not delivered adequate recovery or service delivery support and its governance approach is viewed as unrepresentative, undermining adolescents' sense of agency and voice in local affairs.

These grievances, alongside a low level of trust in local officials, can frame some locals' perceptions that Daesh's approach to governance, service delivery, and justice was more efficient. However, the legacy of the group's brutal rule remains fresh in most residents' minds, curbing support for its return.

Adolescents acutely feel the effects of Syria's economic crisis, which causes fresh challenges and vulnerabilities. With many families struggling to meet their basic needs, older adolescents are increasingly leaving school and taking up work. While we observed some limited nostalgia for the relative economic stability under Daesh's rule, support for their return appears minimal. Daesh's ability to offer material incentives, however, could prove tempting in this desperate environment.

Poor quality of and limited access to education further undermines a core component of adolescents' cognitive development and personal growth, their future prospects, as well as their capacity for reasoning and critical thinking. Community support for education as a source of individual and communal resilience to violent extremism runs high.

Gender dynamics have hardened in recent years, marked by increased burdens on girls, such as early marriage and restrictions on movement, while Daesh's legacy of hyper-masculinity persists among boys.

These conflict effects are integral to and interwoven with adolescents' vulnerability or

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83   This study focuses on factors driving adolescent vulnerability to violent extremism. However, this is only one among an array of potential negative outcomes arising from adolescent experiences of conflict.

resilience to violent extremism. Their feelings of exclusion, isolation, and lack of agency are set within a daily struggle to survive, leaving adolescents adrift and unable to plan for the future. These conditions leave many adolescents vulnerable to manipulation by Daesh or other extremists.

5.1 Improved security since the height of Daesh belies a new culture of violence

Adolescents asked to consider whether they felt safe in their daily lives largely responded positively (59%) – likely reflecting the general improvement in security conditions in northeast Syria since the fall of Daesh (Figure 6). At the same time, 40% believed security conditions had worsened during the past year, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. Overall, adolescents

in Deir ez-Zor feel notably less secure than those in Raqqa, corresponding to Deir ez-Zor's more precarious security situation, the continued threat from Daesh, and ongoing SDF security operations.

After a decade of conflict, a culture of violence appears to have become normalised. Interviewees described how it was common or even 'fashionable' for adolescents as young as 13 to carry guns – deemed symbols of status or manhood – and spoke of the threatening air these youth now project.[84],[85] Adults observed that children's play now focuses on war and the use of (sometimes real) guns.[86]

> *"An adolescent feels that he has become a man, and if he's given a gun, his responsibility grows. This is the way they think – I have a gun now, I'm a man."*
>
> **- Parent, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Figure 6: Perceptions of security

Q: At present, I feel safe in my day-to-day life within the community

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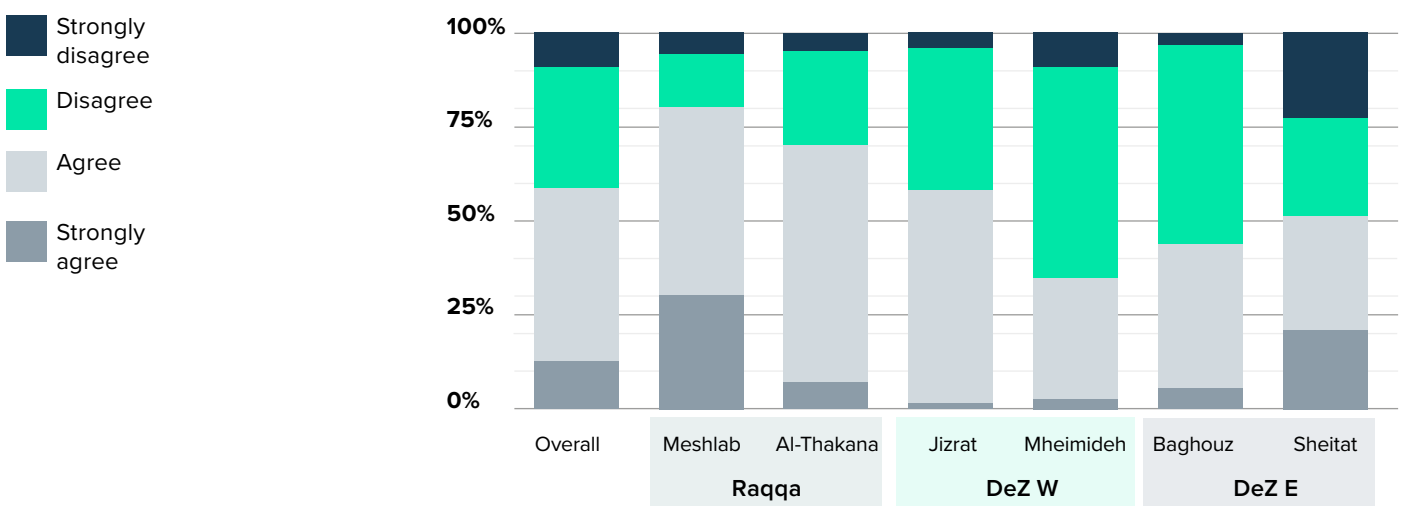
84   KII, civil society member (#4), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021.

85   Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

86   KII, civil society member (#4), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zort (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

Adolescents and adults alike linked the proliferation of weapons to a heightened willingness to use violence to settle disputes.[87] A parent from western Deir ez-Zor recalled how a fight among teenagers resulted in the shooting of a 17-year-old boy.[88] A civil society representative from Raqqa said adolescents had attacked his uncle with grenades during a dispute over pigeons.[89] In a workshop discussion with adolescent boys from western Deir ez-Zor, one participant observed that: "People did not used to shoot every time they had a problem. Now they do because they all have guns".[90]

Increased crime, especially robberies and kidnapping, also are associated with the normalisation of violence. Most adolescents (61%) connected the conflict to criminality and gang behaviour among children their age. Many interviewees – both adolescents and adults – indicated they were scared to travel outside their communities or be outside after dark.[91]

"Those who do not have weapons cannot protect themselves. One needs to be armed to defend himself if a fight breaks out in the street."

- Adolescent, western Deir ez-Zor

Adult interviewees ascribed aggressive behaviour among adolescents to Daesh inculcation of new norms. Under Daesh –

particularly through its Ashbal al-Khelafa (Cubs of the Caliphate) programme – adolescent boys were fed ideals of military masculinity and systematically exposed to violence, with the aim of desensitising them and preparing them for combat and policing roles.[92,93] Gina Vale describes how children's "constant exposure to images, videos and live acts of violence … [numbed] them to the value of human life".[94] Mara Revkin similarly relates gruesome Daesh practices used to desensitise child fighters.[95]

"My son was very polite with everyone. However, since Daesh took control, he became a different person. He keeps fighting with everyone … His behaviour has continued even after the group's defeat. Whenever I try to reason with him, he starts shouting and storms off."

- Parent, eastern Deir ez-Zor

A teacher from western Deir ez-Zor noted the perverting effect of Daesh expectations that boys should "be men and carry arms, kill, and massacre" from an early age.[96] A parent from Raqqa lamented "my adolescent sons have become more violent with their sisters as a result of Daesh trainings and courses. They are still behaving like that even after Daesh was gone. I do not know how to deal with them".[97] Other adults mentioned adolescents' increased nonchalance towards

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87 Interview, parent (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021.

88 Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

89 Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

90 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West) Nov-Dec 2021.

91 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

92 In 2016, Save the Children estimated that over a million children were out of school or forced to follow a Daesh curriculum. Save the Children, **'Over a million children living under ISIS in Iraq have missed out on education: Save the Children'**, November 6, 2016, accessed July 21, 2022.

93 Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#17), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir Ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; see also Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

94 Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

95 Mara Revkin, '"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon": Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq', in ***Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict***, ed. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (United Nations University, 2018), 104-139, accessed July 21, 2022.

96 Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

97 Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

death, with each new fatality proving less of a shock for a generation familiar with loss.[98] These observations raise concerns that a new culture of violence could enable adolescent engagement with violent extremism or other forms of armed violence.

> *"Our children have seen so many dead bodies. They have also seen people beheaded and executed in front of their eyes. As a result, death is no longer strange to them."*
>
> **- Teacher, western Deir ez-Zor**

5.2 Lingering Daesh threat colours life in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor

Despite no longer controlling territory, Daesh retains the ability to intimidate and influence. Sleeper cells have reverted to guerrilla tactics, launching attacks on local security forces with the intent of undermining SDF efforts to stabilise the area and spreading fear.[99] After a slightly quieter 2021, such attacks have been rising since early 2022, particularly in rural areas of northeast Syria.[100]

> *"Daesh is not looking to hold ground but they want to send a clear message that they have a presence and can do whatever they want."*
>
> **- Expert interviewee**

Daesh also exerts pressure on the local population through extortion, demands for *zakat*, an Islamic tax, and ransom.[101] Civil servants and others perceived to be affiliated with the AANES have been threatened, attacked, and sometimes assassinated.[102] An adolescent from western Deir ez-Zor recalled a letter her uncle received from Daesh threatening to assassinate him if he refused to pay them money.[103] Perhaps unsurprisingly, such intimidation tactics have deterred many residents from working with the civil administration,[104] widening the gap between local communities and the AANES, especially among tribes in Deir ez-Zor.[105]

Our field research corroborated other reporting of higher levels of Daesh activity and influence in Deir ez-Zor compared with Raqqa City.[106,107] Perceptions of the Daesh threat were highest in rural, eastern Deir ez-Zor, where dozens of isolated villages and towns lie near the border with Iraq – a long stretch of desert that is difficult for the SDF to control.[108] Overall, respondents in all six research sites said there was limited Daesh presence in comparison to areas of

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98   Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

99   Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021.

100   Rojava Information Center, '**Annual Sleeper Cell Report (2021) for North and East Syria'**, (Qamishli: 2022), accessed July 21, 2022.

101   Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#3), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; see also Hassan Hassan, **'ISIS in Iraq and Syria'.**

102   Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West) Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#3), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress* (2021), accessed July 21, 2022; Gregory Waters, '**ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in January 2022'**, Counter Extremism Project (CEP), February 3, 2022, accessed 21 July, 2022; Rojava Information Center, '**Annual Sleeper Cell Report'**.

103   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), December 2021.

104   Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021.

105   Jazmati et al., **Aftershocks**.

106   Daesh activity and influence likely is higher in rural Raqqa than in the city, but this area was outside the scope of our field data collection.

107   Hassan Hassan, '**ISIS in Iraq and Syria'**; Waters, '**Isis Redux'**.

108   Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

higher reported Daesh activity that were not accessible due to security considerations.[109,110] However, the hesitancy of many respondents to discuss Daesh activity made it difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the extent of the threat in our study locations.

> *"We hear a lot of talk about shops being forced to pay zakat to Daesh affiliates. People are scared of what might happen if they do not pay, so they cave in and do as they are told. They basically have no choice because the risks are high."*
>
> **- Parent, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

AANES security response to Daesh threat a source of criticism – and potential risk factor

Efforts by the SDF and other Syrian Kurdish internal security forces to keep the Daesh threat – and rising crime more generally – at bay are uneven, generating scepticism regarding the AANES's ability to protect communities in northeast Syria and govern effectively.[111] The damage to civilian lives and infrastructure from SDF raids against Daesh targets, especially in Deir ez-Zor, exacerbates a sense of grievance among majority Arab communities.[112]

> *"After ten years of war, people here want safety and peace. People are even saying that*

> *they are fine with the 'devils' ruling them if they are able to bring safety and security. That is the extent to which people are tired of war."*
>
> **- Civil society member, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Criticism of the SDF's capacity to ensure security surfaced in its unfavourable comparison to Daesh's relative effectiveness in this area by adolescents and adults alike. Roughly a fifth of adolescent workshop participants highlighted the failure of local forces to preserve security and combat crime. One adolescent from western Deir ez-Zor observed that stealing had become more common since Daesh fled, saying the general lack of security was prompting continued community support for "the dawla" (Daesh).[113] An expert interviewee explained that references to improved security under Daesh are common, even among those who suffered under the group, with people commonly observing that "we [at least] had security" when Daesh were in control and "we wouldn't be concerned about thieves, robberies".[114] Such sentiments underscore the potential risk that ongoing instability drives support for Daesh or another group perceived as better able to bring order.

Reports of the SDF's forced conscription of residents into the security services – to tackle local crime/insecurity, Daesh, and the potential threat to AANES-controlled areas from Turkish-backed forces – is a significant source of tension.[115] Although Arabs serve in the SDF's rank and file, the dominance of the group's Kurdish leadership rankles and prompts questions about the force's overriding

109   Interview, community leader (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Deir es-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

110   Remote interviews in inaccessible areas supported assessments of higher Daesh activity in these locales. For example, a teacher cited increased assassinations and armed robberies in the past year and noted several Daesh attacks each month. Daesh reportedly retains the ability to enforce social norms in these areas, including influencing the curriculum and monitoring student behaviour.

111   Waters, **'Isis Redux'**.

112   International Crisis Group, '**Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria'**, October 11, 2019, accessed July 24, 2022.

113   Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

114   Interview, technical expert (#7), Oct-Nov 2021.

115   Mohammed Hassan, '**Protests in Deir Ezzor: Causes and Main Demands'**, Chatham House, August 2019, accessed July 25, 2022.

interests, particularly when conscription practices target local teachers, medical personnel, and other essential services providers.[116] Anger over SDF conscription is exacerbated by poor compensation of conscripted fighters, who are often the family breadwinner. Conscripts currently are paid SYP 75,000 monthly,[117] or less than $17 at the black-market rate of roughly SYP 4,500 per USD. SDF soldiers, by comparison, receive stipends worth around $75 per month.[118]

Among adolescents, the prospect that 18-year-olds will be required to serve in the SDF raises concerns, prompting many young men to stay home to avoid arrest or to flee northeast Syria.[119] A community leader from Raqqa noted the pressure parents feel to send their children abroad to keep them safe from SDF conscription.[120] In addition, continued reports of SDF recruitment of children under 18 – despite a formal commitment to avoid such practices – provoke alarm and ill will.[121]

Respondents also highlighted the extent to which the community feared the SDF, and how this generates resentment. For instance, an adolescent from a western Deir ez-Zor workshop claimed that many people were "scared of the SDF" and described an incident where the security force "stormed our house and accused my father of being affiliated with Daesh because of his long beard".[122] Another adolescent at the workshop said: "we enjoyed

safety and peace under the dawla [Daesh], while now we are scared of the SDF".[123]

Fear, anger, and the desire for revenge for the imprisonment or death of a family member, or a perceived or experienced injustice, can become a potent incentive toward violence or engagement with extremist groups.[124] A 2016 study of the reasons why young Syrians join violent extremist groups notes:

> The impact of violence, displacement, trauma and loss cannot be understated as a motivating factor for joining violent extremist groups in Syria … This is occurring in several ways and on multiple levels. First, it is stimulating strong desires to exact revenge for the death of loved ones. Second, it is stimulating the desire to achieve or regain a sense of honour. Third, it is provoking the need to fulfil perceived moral duties to protect and defend the 'home' and the 'family'.[125]

In our survey, 57% of adolescents agreed that revenge helped to explain why some adolescents sympathised or were directly involved with Daesh. Revenge also surfaced as a motivating factor toward extremist violence in the adolescent workshops, though it was only stressed as a key driver by three participants.[126] A girl from western Deir ez-Zor described how Daesh offered help to those seeking revenge: "they tell him: 'come join us and we will help you kill those you are after'".[127] Adolescents "feel strengthened by their support", she added.

116　Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#014), Oct-Nov 2021; Max Hoffman and Alan Makovsky, ***Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis*** (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2021), accessed July 24, 2022; International Crisis Group, '**Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery',** November 18, 2021, accessed July 24, 2022.

117　Eyad Abu Al-Yaman, '**Forced conscription: How the SDF pays youth in its service**', Syria TV, November 26, 2021.

118　Fabrice Balanche, '**How to Preserve the Autonomy of Northeast Syria**', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2022, accessed September 4, 2022.

119　Revkin, '"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"'.

120　Interview, community leader (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

121　UN General Assembly, ***Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*** (June 23, 2022).

122　Workshop, boys/girls aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

123　Ibid.

124　Revkin, '"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"'; Royal United Services Institute, ***Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation*** (London: RUSI, 2016), accessed July 24, 2022.

125　International Alert, '**Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria',** (London: International Alert, 2016), accessed July 24, 2022.

126　Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir Ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

127　Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

> *"Some people joined Daesh to take revenge on those who killed their father, brother, or relative. Others join the group to make those who hurt them pay."*
> **- Civil society member, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Just over a third (38%) of adult interviewees cited the desire of revenge as a potential driver of recruitment among adolescents – with many noting that it is a potent force within the broader community. A civil society activist from western Deir ez-Zor said the high number of people killed during the fight against Daesh, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of alleged Daesh members and their families, could have made revenge a factor for many.[128]

AANES governance failures fuel feelings of exclusion and reduce perceptions of agency

Respondent complaints about the SDF's handling of security echo broader dissatisfaction with AANES governance, which is criticised by both adults and adolescents as inefficient, unrepresentative, and corrupt.[129] Although the AANES generally is viewed as preferable to a return of the regime or Daesh,[130] trust in governance is low. Only 30% of adolescents surveyed said they "trust local officials to make decisions to help improve life for me and others of my age in the community" (Figure 7).

Criticism of the AANES among the Arab population of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor arises not only from its handling of day-to-day security and economic stresses, but from perceptions of its domination by Kurdish interests – particularly the interests of the

Figure 7: Trust in local officials

Q: I trust local officials to make decisions that help improve life for me and others my age in the community

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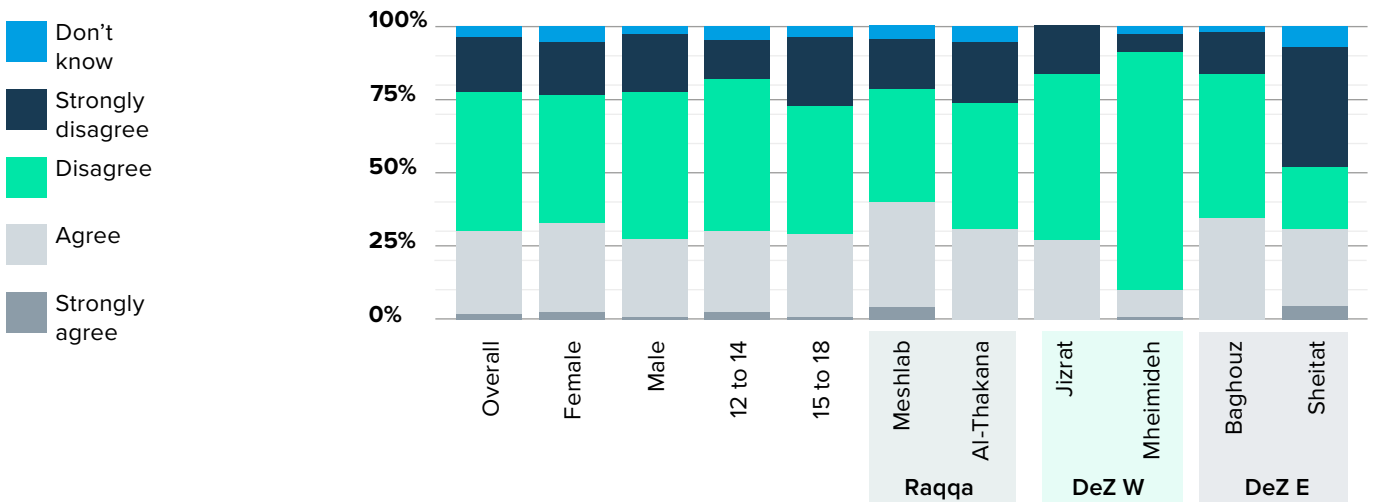
128   Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

129   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2022; International Crisis Group, *Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery*.

130   Max Hoffman and Alan Makovsky, *Northern Syria Security Dynamics* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2021); Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#2), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#5), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or Kurdistan Workers' Party).[131] AANES efforts to promote grassroots political participation and Kurdish-Arab balance in local municipalities and administrative councils is undermined by a tendency to appoint key officials with only limited input from local residents and by the perception that control over strategic decision-making is kept in the hands of Kurdish officials.[132] "The lack of representation in the governance and security structures is making [local] people more resentful towards the authorities and their governance project", one northeast Syria expert commented.[133] This exclusive approach to governance undermines the sense of agency and voice that is critical to building individual and community resilience against violent extremism.

The failure of the AANES to address adolescent needs – such as the lack of budgeted resources for youth committees within local Civil Councils – exacerbates a sense of alienation among youth.[134] Research by Jasmine El-Gamal and Hanny Megally highlights how corruption, ruling elite impunity, poor governance, and real or perceived exclusion propelled violent extremism in northeast Syria earlier in the conflict and could do so again.[135]

"If you compare the judicial system these days to [that under] Daesh, you will see that today's legal system is inefficient and can be twisted to fit the interests of those in power. Contrarily,

Daesh implemented a strict system that delivered justice to everyone."
- **Community leader, Raqqa**

Perceptions that the governing authorities dispense services in a preferential manner likewise fuels discontent. An adolescent workshop participant in eastern Deir ez-Zor complained corruption had permeated the wider community,[136] while a civil society worker in western Deir ez-Zor observed that commodities and aid are unevenly distributed in favour of those who work with the AANES and their relatives.[137] Expert interviews reinforced this, with one highlighting the levels of popular anger generated by the tendency of "local authorities [to prioritise] their relatives and friends for hiring into public sector employment".[138]

These findings align with other research on this topic. For example, Zaki Mehchy, Haid Haid, and Lina Khatib found that existing governance structures "are incapable of preventing its officials, as well as influential profiteers from outside its structures, from turning the Autonomous Administration into an avenue to secure personal interests".[139]

More generally, perceptions that the AANES justice systems fails to meet community needs compound feelings of exclusion and the sense that Daesh, though harsh in its punishments, imposed uniform strictures – although our field research did not surface a direct connection between these complaints and adolescents' daily lives. A parent from

131   El-Gamal and Megally, **Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism**.

132   Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#2), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#17), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#14), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#22), Oct-Nov 2021; UNESCWA, **Mapping Local Governance in Syria**; El-Gamal and Megally, **Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism**.

133   Interview, technical expert (#22), Oct-Nov 2021.

134   Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#2), Oct-Nov 2021.

135   El-Gamal and Megally, **Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism**.

136   Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

137   Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021

138   Interview, technical expert (#14), Oct-Nov 2021.

139   Zaki Mehchy, Haid Haid, and Lina Khatib, **Assessing Control and Power Dynamics in Syria: De facto authorities and state institutions**, (London: Chatham House 2020), accessed August 19, 2022.

western Deir ez-Zor described a case in which the AANES had neglected to intervene in a local land dispute, leaving the complainant with little "choice but to fight back or rely on groups like Daesh to get his property back". A community leader from Raqqa likewise observed that:

> When Daesh was ruling, there were no problems or infighting. The Islamic court was capable of ensuring justice. It [the court] was even able to solve historical disputes that no one else managed to end. While now, a dispute between two boys can start a war. That is why people feel nostalgic for [the Daesh] era.[140]

Recent research by the Omran Center for Strategic Studies found that favouritism, incompetence, and the domination of the AANES justice system by PKK cadres drives people towards alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes, such as tribal arbitration or Syrian regime courts.[141]

The legacy of Daesh's brutality limits its appeal, despite simmering discontent

Although fear and resentment of the SDF and Kurdish leadership prompt unfavorable comparisons with Daesh's governance approach, this does not translate automatically into support for the group's return. Experiences of Daesh's harsh rule emerge as a key factor limiting the group's ability

to regain influence in the region. One-fifth (21%) of adolescent workshop participants willing to discuss Daesh said negative experiences of life under Daesh were a strong deterrent against it.[142] They spoke of Daesh's confiscation of homes, destruction, harsh rules, and punishments.[143] One adolescent girl from eastern Deir ez-Zor recalled that "Even men were scared of Daesh because they could easily be arrested and tortured by the group for no real reason."[144]

> "We were frequently stopped by Daesh in the streets and forced to watch them beheading people or cutting their hands. No one wants to see horrible scenes like that again."
>
> - **Adolescent girl, western Deir ez-Zor**

Fifty-four of the 67 adult interviewees willing to discuss Daesh highlighted its harsh regulations, punishments, and use of violence, and explicitly linked these to a desire not to see them return.[145] Describing her relief at being able to leave home without fear of punishment for her appearance, a civil society worker from western Deir ez-Zor stressed "we do not want to relive that nightmare again".[146]

Antipathy towards Daesh is magnified in areas where Daesh enacted brutality on a larger scale – for example, in Sheitat in eastern Deir ez-Zor, where up to 900 community members were massacred in 2014[147] after the Sheitat tribe refused to pledge allegiance to Daesh.[148] The loss of so many from the community

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140 Interview, community leader (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

141 Sasha Al Alou, Shadi Abo Fajer, and Fadil Hanci, *The Autonomous Administration: A Judicial Approach to Understanding the Model and Experience* (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

142 Just 15 of 70 adolescent workshop participants were willing to discuss Daesh, likely due to security concerns.

143 Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, boys 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

144 Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

145 The number of adult interviewees offering negative views of Daesh should not be interpreted as a quantitative measurement of perceptions. However, we assess it to be significant, as negative views were much more commonly expressed than positive (5%) or mixed (8%) perceptions.

146 Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

147 Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

148 Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Al Jazeera and news agencies, '**Islamic State group "executes 700" in Syria**', August 17, 2014, accessed July 24, 2022.

discourages public expression of pro-Daesh sentiment and deters adolescent involvement with the group.[149] Although such observations could be perceived as speculative, there is some evidence to indicate that community rejection of violence can set social norms which influence the attitudes of those who may be inclined toward radicalisation and have a deterrent effect.[150]

Adult interviewees likewise bear the scars of the destruction wrought by the campaign to oust Daesh. As an eastern Deir ez-Zor community leader observed: "We had to pay the enormous price in all sectors because of the battle against them … this has raised our awareness, and there is no support base for Daesh left here."[151]

> *"Wherever Daesh goes, it brings destruction … People will not support the group because they do not want to see a return to that level of destruction and daily violence – coming both from Daesh and those who are fighting."*
>
> **- Civil society worker, Raqqa**

Gender and cultural or religious conservatism also had a strong bearing on the level of suffering under Daesh. Resentment against the group is generally high among women and adolescent girls. A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor spoke of how: "Women specifically reject the presence of Daesh, refuse to let them return … They marginalised women and took away their freedom and rights … they were imprisoned in their own houses." When it came to implementing Daesh's harsh rules and dress code, those who hold conservative views were less

affected than residents who are religious but follow more liberal social customs and norms.

Limited but growing lure of Daesh ideology

Studies of Daesh's ability to draw support among adolescents rarely emphasise ideology as the initial driver of engagement with the group. El-Gamal and Megally emphasise the greater importance of other factors, such as the security vacuum, economic and social vulnerability amid chaos, revenge, and the need for protection.[152]

Our field data suggests ideology may be increasing in importance since the group's territorial defeat, at least among those already inclined toward the group. This is due in part to the reduced capacity of the group to offer other incentives since losing territory, and partly a legacy of its prior indoctrination efforts. Adolescents who cleaved toward Daesh's worldview during its height may cling more tightly to ideology as they search for direction in the aftermath of its defeat. In his research on ideological incentives for joining Daesh, Haid Haid identifies supporters of Daesh who become more ideologically motivated after exposure to the group's worldview as the most difficult to reach with counter-radicalisation programming.[153] These risks are perceived to be higher among adolescents who remain in SDF camp or detention settings.

> *"They convince them that fighting the SDF is jihad because they are infidels and those who*

149   Interview, community leader (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

150   Nafees Hamid, '**Briefing Note: Mass media and persuasion: Evidence-based lessons for strategic communications in CVE**', XCEPT, 19 July 2022.

151   Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

152   El-Gamal and Megally, ***Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism***.

153   Haid Haid, **Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria: Efforts, Priorities and Challenges** (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018), accessed September 4, 2022.

die trying to implement Sharia go to heaven. Some people believe them and join."

- **Adolescent girl, western Deir ez-Zor**

Nearly half (48%) of adolescents surveyed view the desire to implement Sharia as a motivating factor for others their age to become involved with Daesh (see Figure 10 on page 37). Six of the adolescent workshop participants – from different workshops in Deir ez-Zor – talked about how Daesh uses religion to motivate their peers to join the group.[154] A boy from western Deir ez-Zor noted that limited familiarity with Islam increased vulnerability among youth who "just want to go to heaven and ISIS tells them how to get there [quickly]".[155]

A similar number of adult interviewees (47%) observed that Daesh has been able to rally adolescents through religion. A teacher from eastern Deir ez-Zor cited Daesh's ability to offer a powerful sense of identity and purpose.[156,157] Conversely, some adult interviewees sought to downplay or even deny the importance of ideology. A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor stressed that adolescents are currently "very far from religion" and unlikely to see relevance in Daesh's worldview.[158] Experts we spoke to were somewhat divided in their assessments on the relevance of ideology – some felt that it remained an important factor, while others felt it was less relevant, at least as an initial driver.

5.3 Economic stress reverberates in adolescents' lives

Adolescents in northeast Syria are acutely vulnerable to the region's deep economic challenges. Families struggle to access basic services and meet their children's daily needs. Many adolescents are required to work to support their families, often dropping out of school to do so.[159] A 2021 Save the Children study in Raqqa City reported higher reliance on "coping mechanisms to meet basic food needs and the increased likelihood of working children" in the city's lower income neighbourhoods.[160]

A large majority (77%) of adolescent respondents across all areas surveyed agreed their "family has a hard time meeting … daily needs" (Figure 8) – with nearly 90% agreeing in three of the four areas surveyed in Deir ez-Zor. Similarly, 72% of adolescents surveyed agreed that "My family has difficulty accessing basic services (e.g. water, electricity, health care)".

Again, the proportion of adolescents agreeing with this statement was highest in the Deir ez-Zor towns of Baghouz (89%), Mheimideh (90%), and Jizrat al-Buhmeid (97%) – a likely result of extensive damage during the fight against Daesh and the difficulty in servicing these areas in its wake, as well as historic marginalisation.[161]

The burden of helping their families cope with economic hardship falls heaviest

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154 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, girls/boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021.

155 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

156 Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021.

157 These are categorised as 'individual incentives', using the theoretical framework employed for this study.

158 Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

159 Interview, parent (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

160 Laura Kivelä and Daniel Gorevan, *Return to Al Raqqa: Supporting Inclusive Recovery through an Area-based Approach,* (London: Save the Children, 2021), accessed July 24, 2022.

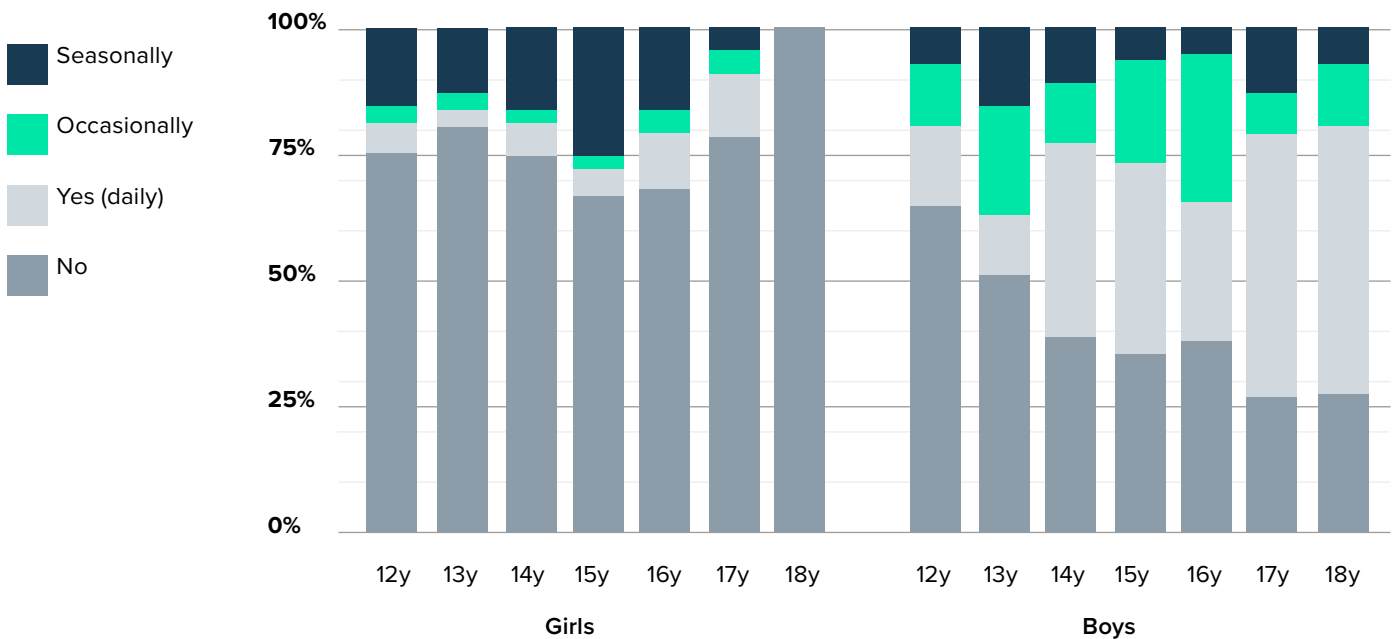161 Interview, technical expert (#1), Oct-Nov 2021.

Figure 8: Daily needs

Q: My family has a hard time meeting our daily needs

Legend:
- Don't know
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
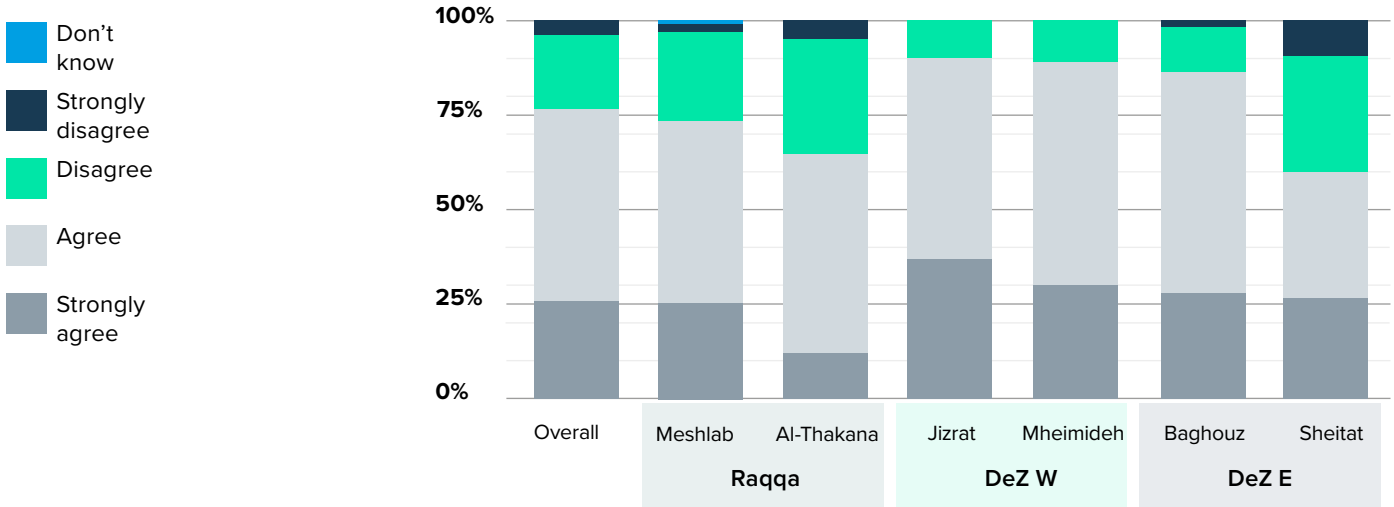
Figure 9: Livelihoods

Q: Do you work?

Legend:
- Seasonally
- Occasionally
- Yes (daily)
- No

on older boys. Among boys surveyed, the proportion working rose from 34% among 12-year-olds to 72% among 17- and 18-year-olds (Figure 9) — an increase that corresponds with higher school drop-out rates reported by this group. Depending on age, the type of work undertaken may differ. Young boys typically run deliveries and errands, while older adolescents may learn a profession, such as carpentry, personal grooming (barbers), or a repair or technical role.[162]

162   Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

By contrast, girls surveyed largely were not working and, by age 18, appeared to stop working entirely – possibly reflecting that, as the traditional marriage age approaches, work outside the home among non-family members is less culturally acceptable. A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor noted that adolescent girls who do work usually work in shops (hairdressers or tailors) or in farming.[163]

The necessity for some to work exacerbates pre-existing divisions between socioeconomic classes – a dynamic noted in particular in Raqqa City, where differences between those still able to afford everyday luxuries (such as cell phones or nice clothes) and those who cannot are quite visible and a source of adolescent embarrassment, according to a local parent.[164] Competition for necessities in short supply also heightens tension and, at times, leads to violence between adolescents.

One northeast Syria expert recounted that "bread shortages, which are common, usually lead to physical fights among young people, who would have been waiting in queues for a long time and do not want to go back home empty-handed".[165]

🌐 Economic freefall and poor service delivery heighten Daesh vulnerability risks

Economic hardship and a years-long wait for improved service delivery after the counter-Daesh fight combine with concerns over ongoing insecurity and suspicions of the Kurdish-led AANES, creating a potential opening for Daesh or others to offer an alternative. This mix of factors is highlighted as a potential driver of violent extremism in northeast Syria by El-Gamal and Megally:

> Efforts to discourage future violent extremism in the northeast would do well to account for immediate structural vulnerabilities such as the lack of basic infrastructure, services, and education that existed under the GoS's [Government of Syria's] pre-2011 rule and continues today under the Administration and SDF. Any efforts would additionally need to address long-term grievances relating to marginalization, enjoyment of basic rights, and unfair wealth distribution, rather than the question of ideology which appears to be only one of the drivers—and a weak one at that—in northeast Syria.[166]

The potential risk may be highest in Deir ez-Zor, where economic stresses are most acute and Daesh remains most active.[167] Frustration has been growing among local tribes over the lack of local control over key resources, such as oil, which remains in the hands of the AANES despite prior agreement for the Deir ez-Zor Civilian Council to assume "self-management of commodities".[168]

The slow pace of reconstruction and essential services restoration compounds discontent.[169] A community leader in eastern Deir ez-Zor noted that the AANES's inability to provide sufficient services "is pushing people to say that the situation under Daesh was better",[170] though such sentiments do not necessarily translate into support for the group. El-Gamal and Megally likewise reported widespread critique among northeast Syria residents related to:

> [The] lack of adequate water and electricity supply and the lack of significant progress

163   Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

164   Interview, parent (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

165   Interview, technical expert (#8), Oct-Nov 2021.

166   El-Gamal and Megally, *Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism*.

167   Ibid.

168   Hoffman and Makovsky, *Northern Syria Security Dynamics*.

169   Mehchy, Haid, and Khatib, *Assessing Control and Power Dynamics in Syria*.

170   Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

in their communities on reconstructing schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure projects. Some residents in Deir Ezzor have openly lamented the current situation, stating "the *dawla* [Daesh] was at least providing electricity!"[171]

The difficulty adolescents cite in meeting basic needs across all survey locations highlights the day-to-day challenges in northeast Syria. Adolescent and adult respondents alike speculated that popular perceptions of better economic conditions and service delivery under Daesh could create space for the group's return, if these issues are not addressed by the AANES.[172]

The Daesh lure of material incentives amid extreme hardship

Daesh has a history of using material incentives to drive recruitment, drawing on diverse income streams generated through its illicit and black-market activities, kidnappings, and exploitation of local natural resources.[173] The group selectively targets those in need. Research by Revkin among adolescents and other former members of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in Syria highlights the use of salary payments, food, and cell phones to attract recruits. She describes incentives offered to families in Raqqa who sent males (including adolescent boys) to fight, exploiting food insecurity arising from prolonged sieges or destroyed agriculture.[174]

During the height of its control, Daesh sought to demonstrate that allegiance to the group would bring relative advantage, with members receiving stipends covering housing, utilities, medical care, and the needs of extended family.[175] Vale has documented how, during a period in which combat duty was the principal means of employment, key motivations for enlistment included Daesh salaries (averaging $200 per month for adult fighters and $100 for children) and 'martyrdom rewards' to families of the fallen.[176]

Adult interviewees in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor recounted similar stories from the period of Daesh control – highlighting how material incentives trumped ideology, at least initially. They described how the group would rope in adolescents with material lures, later turning to indoctrination.[177] A teacher from western Deir ez-Zor recalled that his nephew joined Daesh to secure a source of income, but then became so inculcated in their belief system that he remained loyal even after Daesh's territorial defeat.[178]

Limited visibility into current Daesh activities in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the group is still able to build support through financial and material incentives. A 2021 report by the Rojava Information Center (RIC) cited the group's continued ability to exploit a bleak economic landscape:

> Part of the group's staying power was that it remains a well-funded organization in a region suffering from extreme economic distress. This year, the SDF tells RIC that many of the [Daesh] affiliates they arrested reported doing tasks

171   El-Gamal and Megally, *Preventing the Re-emergence of Violent Extremism*.

172   Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

173   Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

174   Revkin, **'"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"'**

175   Haid, *Reintegrating ISIS Supporters*.

176   Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

177   Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

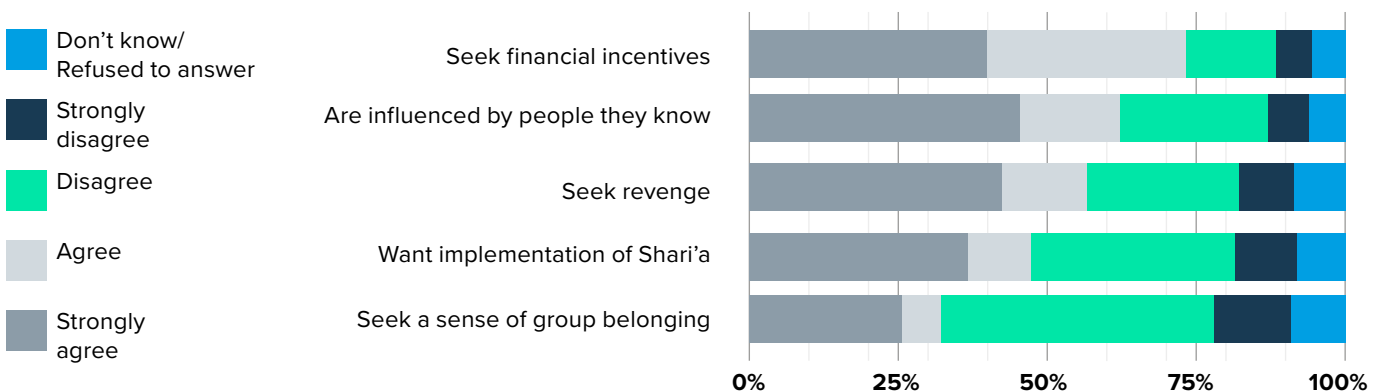178   Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

for the organization for financial, rather than ideological reasons.[179]

This chimes with our research: 74% of adolescents taking part in our survey viewed financial incentives as a likely lure – more so than other possible reasons for supporting Daesh (Figure 10). In the workshops, adolescents underscored the financial difficulties their families face. Although only three participants directly referenced how Daesh takes advantage of economic stress to recruit,[180] none contested the importance of financial incentives. An adolescent girl from western Deir ez-Zor observed that Daesh "take[s] advantage of those who are not able to pay for their rent", adding that "they offer them money to cover expenses and then they start asking them to carry out activities for them".[181] A boy in a separate workshop in western Deir ez-Zor said the group offers to purchase cell phones, prompting those in need to "take the phone and join the group to get more".[182]

Two thirds of adult interviewees discussed how material incentives could sway adolescents, with some flagging how the promise of a cell phone was a simple way to generate adolescent support.[183] Others referred to the pressure all Syrians feel, even adolescents, to provide for their families. One civil society worker from Raqqa highlighted that those who cannot provide are "expected to do anything to change that … [and] will not hesitate to seek help from anyone, including Daesh".[184] Some adults believed recruitment using financial and material lures was not widespread at present, but they could see its attraction. A teacher from Raqqa, for example, claimed that Daesh paid a monthly salary of $500 to $1000, remarking that "this is very tempting, to be honest".[185]

Figure 10: Perceived drivers of involvement in Daesh

Q: Children my age may support or become involved with groups like Daesh because they …

Legend:
- Don't know/ Refused to answer
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Categories: Seek financial incentives; Are influenced by people they know; Seek revenge; Want implementation of Shari'a; Seek a sense of group belonging. Axis: 0% – 25% – 50% – 75% – 100%

179   Rojava Information Center, **'Annual Sleeper Cell Report'**.

180   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

181   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

182   Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

183   Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2) Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

184   Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

185   Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

5.4 Disrupted education weakens a key pillar of adolescent development

Even before the conflict, educational attainment in rural, northeast Syria lagged behind the rest of the country, in part due to decades of underinvestment. Northeast Syria, particularly Deir ez-Zor, had the country's lowest literacy levels, lowest rates of school enrolment, and fewest years of schooling.[186] Ten years of conflict and Daesh control have made a bad situation worse. A 2021 needs assessment in northeast Syria found that the education system was failing to support the region's children, with over a third of those aged 10-14 functioning at grade one level.[187] Deficiencies identified by this assessment included:

- **Access challenges:** Insufficient or damaged school infrastructure and materials, and a lack of qualified teachers, limit access and cause overcrowding. Many parents struggle to meet the costs of education, such as school fees, or face the difficult choice of pulling their kids from school to work. The dropout rate is high, as adolescents leave school for work or early marriage.

- **Quality constraints:** Formal education is hindered by the limited availability of accredited curricula in the AANES-controlled areas and few options for higher-level certification. Students with the means to do so pay for instruction in the regime curriculum and travel across conflict lines for exams. Poor-quality instruction also undermines learning outcomes across all curricula.

- **Safety risks:** Insecurity on the journey to and from school and within schools reduces attendance and affects students' mental health; many associate school buildings with trauma linked to Daesh and bombing raids.

Many children in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor have been out of school for extended periods. Half (51%) of adolescents surveyed said that they were no longer in school (Figure 11), with dropout rates rising for older adolescents, particularly boys (Figure 12). More adolescents were out of school in Deir ez-Zor than in Raqqa – with the highest level of school attendance in al-Thakana, a relatively well-off and well-serviced neighbourhood in Raqqa City.

Adolescents cited economic pressure as the most significant reason for leaving school: 65% said they needed to work; 38% said they could not afford the costs (Figure 13). Interviews with parents and teachers echoed this. A parent from Raqqa observed that adolescents worked in "every shop" in the community.[188] A teacher from Raqqa described student departures from school for work as common.[189] Adults likewise noted the high cost of school uniforms, supplies, transport, private classes, and the cost of exams in regime-held areas.[190] A parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor described a widow who did not have enough money to buy her son stationery, let alone clothing for school.[191]

> *"A student walks to school and can't be sure of what may happen next, for example, will there be an explosion or another type of event."*
>
> **- Teacher, western Deir ez-Zor**

186   Jazmati et al., ***Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria***.

187   War Child Holland, *No Child Left Behind: Shedding Light on Education, Psychosocial, and Protection Issues in Northeast Syria*, unpublished report, January 2021.

188   Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

189   Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

190   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), December 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

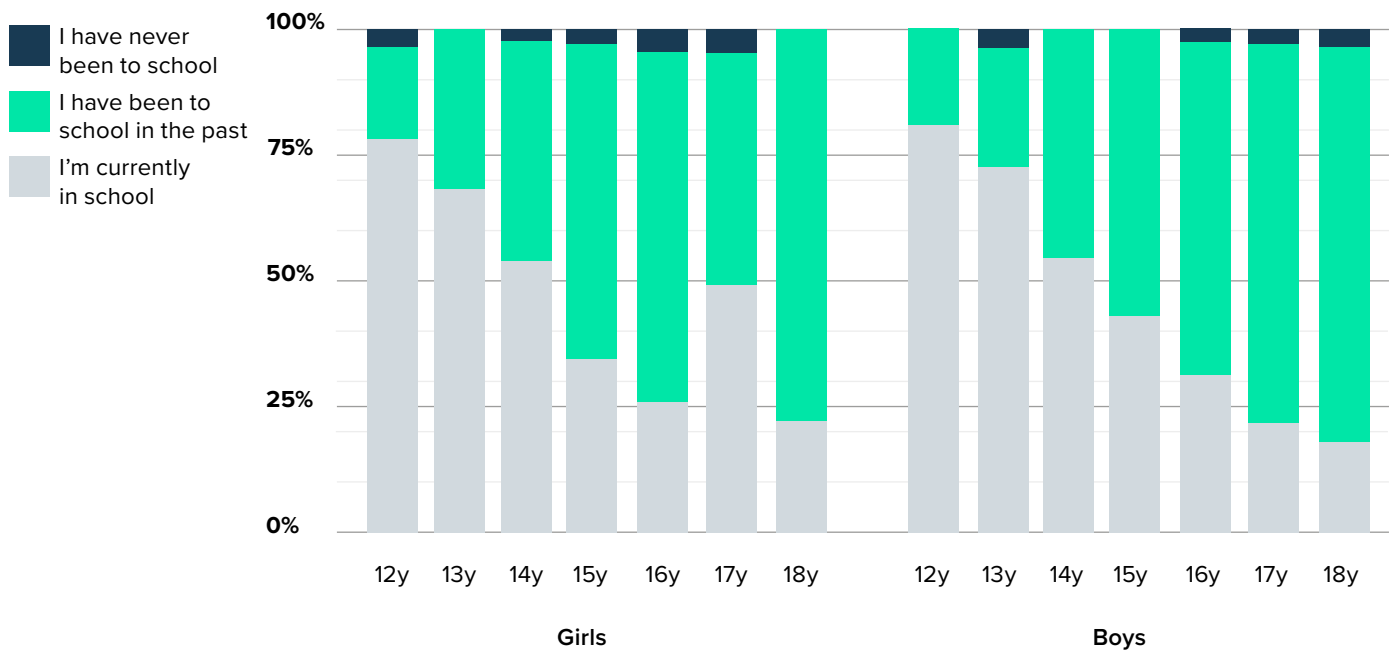191   Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

Figure 11: School attendance by area

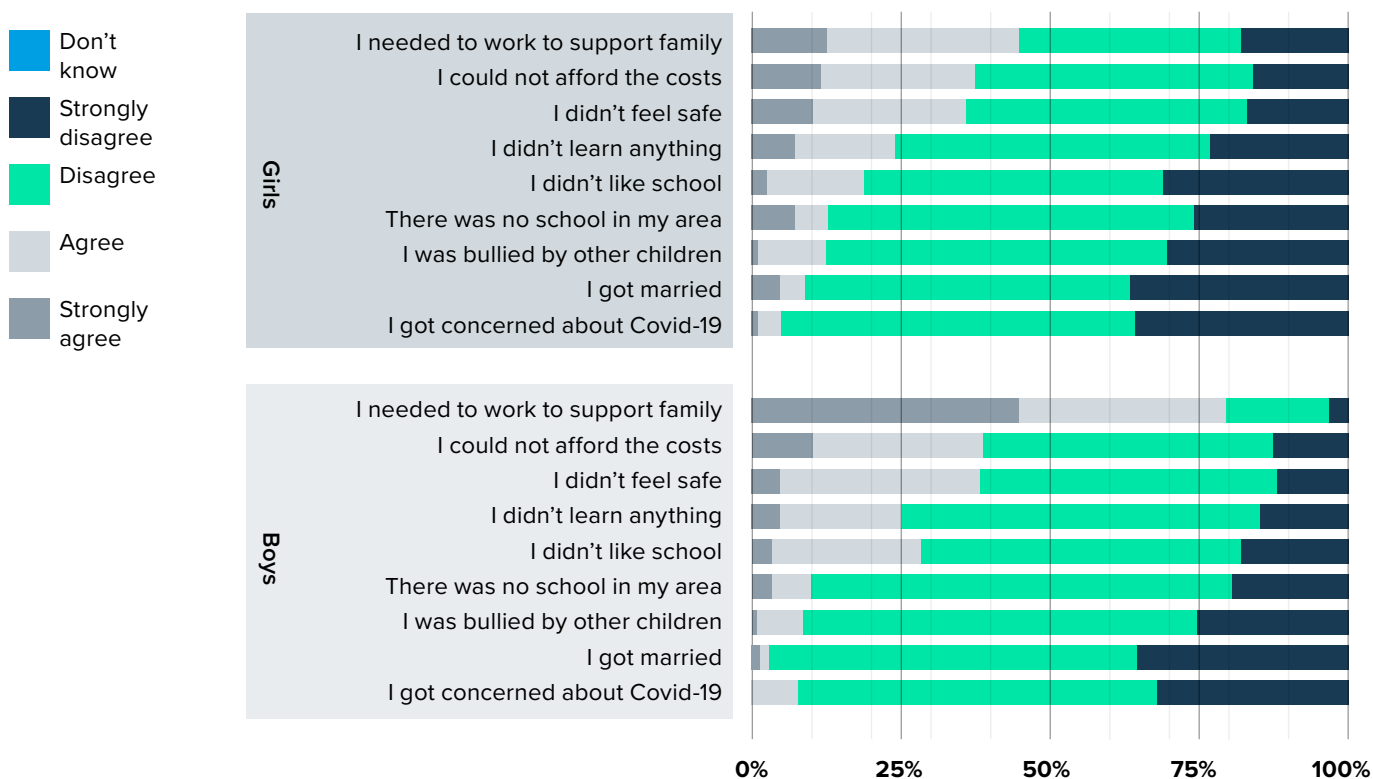*Q: Which of the following statements best reflects your schooling?*

Legend:
- I have never been to school
- I have been to school in the past
- I'm currently in school
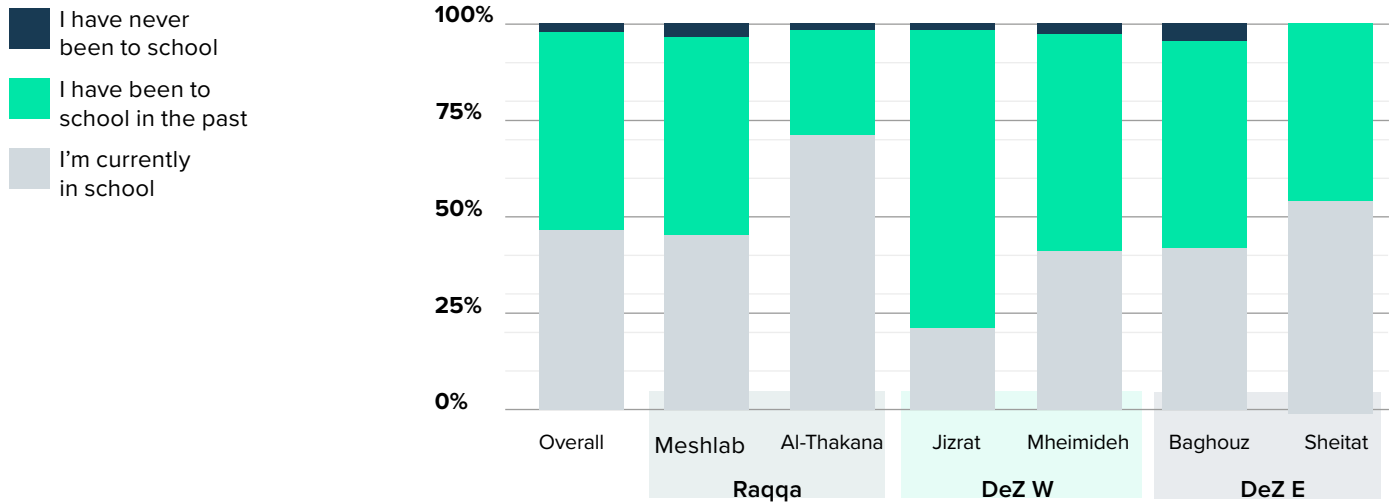
Figure 12: School attendance by gender

Q: Which of the following statements best reflects your schooling?

Legend:
- I have never been to school
- I have been to school in the past
- I'm currently in school

Figure 13: Reasons for dropping out of school

Q: I left school because …

Legend:
- Don't know
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Girls
- I needed to work to support family
- I could not afford the costs
- I didn't feel safe
- I didn't learn anything
- I didn't like school
- There was no school in my area
- I was bullied by other children
- I got married
- I got concerned about Covid-19

Boys
- I needed to work to support family
- I could not afford the costs
- I didn't feel safe
- I didn't learn anything
- I didn't like school
- There was no school in my area
- I was bullied by other children
- I got married
- I got concerned about Covid-19

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Insecurity was cited as a reason for leaving school by just over a third (37%) of adolescents. Qualitative data indicates concerns about security in the street, as well as fear of mistreatment by peers or teachers.[192] For instance, an adolescent girl from western Deir ez-Zor reported that many students had dropped out of school because of harsh treatment from teachers.[193] One parent noted that her neighbour's son carries a knife to school to protect himself from other students.[194] A teacher from eastern Deir ez-Zor recalled an instance of students threatening and attacking another teacher who had intervened to stop a fight.[195]

Our findings support other studies indicating that the longer adolescents spend outside education, the harder it becomes for them to return.[196] A teacher in Raqqa referred to gaps in knowledge or skills that prevent dropouts from returning to school or hamstring the ability of returning students to catch up with their peers, propelling further dropouts among those who become discouraged.[197]

"Each school year is designed to provide students with information that builds on the year before and prepares for the year after. Although students may overcome losing a year or two, achieving that becomes extremely difficult when losing several years. That is

192   Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

193   Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West) December 2021.

194   Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

195   Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; see also War Child Holland, *No Child Left Behind*.

196   USAID Syria Essential Services II, ***Northeast Syria Education Sector Assessment*** (Washington D.C.: USAID, 2019).

197   Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

why the majority of students who re-enrol in schools after a period of interruption do not last long due to the pressure. The same applies to those who join classes that are suitable for their knowledge level due to the age difference between them and the rest of their classmates."

- **Teacher, Raqqa**

Education and learning gaps viewed as a radicalisation risk, but also a key counterweight

The deterioration of education in northeast Syria during the conflict emerged in the field research as a key factor in adolescent vulnerability to violent extremism, as well as a potential avenue for strengthening resilience against it. Respondent comments centred on the role of education (formal or informal) in developing adolescents' 'cognitive resources' – here defined as the ability of adolescents to understand the world around them or to consider the long-term consequences of their actions. Among the adults we spoke to, nearly a third (30%) said the inability of adolescents to think critically created an opening for Daesh recruitment. A teacher from eastern Deir ez-Zor, for example, said adolescent "illiteracy and the lack of social awareness [creates] fertile ground for the group [Daesh]".[198] Some observed that limited "religious culture or knowledge" makes adolescents more easily persuaded by Daesh and their ideology.

"Today if someone from the sleeper cells presents the idea to a youth who is not aware, he will easily believe his words because he

doesn't have the necessary level of religious culture or education."

- **Civil society member, western Deir ez-Zor**

Respondents stressed the importance of improving adolescents' cognitive resources or critical thinking skills to build their resilience to the messaging presented through Daesh propaganda or recruiters. Among adult interviewees, nearly three quarters (72%) stressed the importance of formal education as a key resilience factor and a means to develop broader "awareness" among adolescents about the world and their actions. A parent from western Deir ez-Zor spoke of the need for a "100% emphasis on education because it is what will take people out of ignorance and give them the right outlook on the future and life".[199] A parent from western Deir ez-Zor said that "if a person is educated and cultured, they know what's wrong and right".[200] The latter gave the example of illiterate adolescents who "don't understand the danger of these things and just carry guns". Adult interviewees generally associated education with enhanced adolescent capacity to navigate current and future challenges, including the lure of violent extremism.[201]

Teachers emerged as key trusted figures. Two-thirds (65%) of adolescents surveyed said they "trust teachers to make decisions that help improve life for me and others my age"; similarly, 66% agreed that teachers help improve the lives of adolescents. However, when asked who they turn to for advice, only 13% cited teachers, well below the figures for parents, siblings, or family elders – possibly a reflection of the roughly 51% of the survey sample that is not currently in school.

Adult interviewees frequently mentioned the importance of teachers in reducing the risk of

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198 Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

199 Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

200 Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

201 Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

adolescent involvement with Daesh – not only based on their role in classroom education but as watchful intermediaries and guides.[202] A teacher from western Deir ez-Zor noted the time teachers spend with adolescents in the classroom, and the opportunities this offers to spot concerning behaviour.[203] The teacher recalled instances when teacher engagement with students who appear to be influenced by Daesh succeeded in changing their behaviour.

The field data conforms with evidence in the literature about the role of teachers as a first line of defence in detecting early signs of radicalisation such as "early or subtle changes in behaviour, attitude, social networks or emotional responses."[204] Some circumspection is vital here, however. It is possible that adult interviewees emphasised inadequate education as a driver of violence because it feels intuitively correct, and not because there is observed evidence of a causal link.[205] The link between education and extremism is a notoriously controversial issue within the study of political violence.[206] Some studies, such as Alan Krueger's *What Makes a Terrorist*,[207] reject the hypothesis that inadequate education contributes to violence. Others show that many involved in violent extremism globally are often highly educated.[208] Evidence from northeast Syria is not clear either way. The local context – where students face a decimated education system, free-falling economy, and limited livelihood prospects – differs from conditions in many other countries included in global studies on violent extremism.

5.5 Gender-specific impacts of conflict and Daesh

Conflict and Daesh's legacy have transformed life for many girls in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, particularly affecting their experiences within the home and family. Both adult and adolescent respondents emphasised the rise in early marriage, the increased burden on girls (and women) to provide for their families in the absence of male family members, and movement restrictions. Adolescent girls in northeast Syria face gender-specific security threats; forced displacement and disruptions to law and order often go hand in hand with higher incidences of sexual harassment, rape, abductions, and domestic abuse.

Many of these issues are linked in complex ways. In data collected among adolescent girls in Syria, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) concluded that Syrian girls face patterns of violence – sexual harassment, movement restrictions, domestic violence, forced marriage – that become more intense as they progress through adolescence. An adolescent girl experiencing one form of violence faces a higher risk of falling prey to another:

> A girl forced into child marriage five years ago may by now have become a widow or a divorcee – sometimes more than once – with children to protect and feed. She may have had to forgo her education as a result of her early marriage, resulting in significantly diminished prospects for livelihood and personal growth. This, in turn, substantially increases the likelihood of becoming vulnerable to exploitation and

202 Interview, teacher (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1),Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

203 Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

204 Michele Grossman, '**The Role of Families and Civil Society in Detecting Radicalisation and Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism**', in *Combatting Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe – From Cooperation to Collaboration*, (Berlin/Singapore: Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung/S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, January 2018).

205 Khalil, 'A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists'.

206 Jessica Trisko Darden, '**Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth'**, American Enterprise Unit, 2019, accessed July 24, 2022.

207 Alan Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

208 Diego Gambetta and Steffan Hertog, **'Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education'**, European Sociological Review 33, no. 1 (February 2017): 161-164; Darden, *Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth*.

negative coping mechanisms such as polygamy, survival sex, and others … In an environment that has been destabilized by protracted conflict, [the impacts of this violence on the trajectory of a girl's development] can have deleterious consequences that range anywhere between anxiety and depression, all the way to unwanted pregnancies and maternal death.[209]

Our field research supports the argument that interrelated forms of violence in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor affect girls' development through adolescence and shape their prospects for the future.

Early marriage on the rise

Child marriage[210] has long existed as a cultural norm and primary protection threat for girls in Syria, but the conflict has prompted surging rates – from 12% in 2011 to 18% in 2012,[211] and up to 46% by 2019.[212] Increasing numbers of girls find themselves forced into marriage with men who are often much older, leading to suffering and abuse that can include a downward spiral of divorce or widowhood, badly paid work, and exploitation.

"There are currently many risks, that is why parents want to marry their daughters as soon as possible to protect them. They feel that their honour is protected as soon as she gets married. They no longer have to worry about her being raped or issues of the sort that could bring disgrace to the family and its reputation."

- **Community leader, Raqqa**

A number of adults interviewed cited early marriage as a way to protect girls from harm caused by displacement, insecurity, and economic hardship.[213] In practice, such 'protection' often is intended to safeguard their virginity and 'honour' (and that of their family). Others said that during Daesh's rule, families married girls off early to avoid their forced marriage to foreign fighters.[214] A civil society worker from western Deir ez-Zor reported that "Parents were scared that someone from Daesh [would] come and marry her by force and intimidation".[215] Two adolescent girls in eastern Deir ez-Zor said that many young women their age were married off to community members to avoid marrying foreign fighters.[216]

"Our area is full of widows and orphans as a result of the war. These women have become responsible for everything. They have no one to help. Therefore, the mother and her children start working and selling stuff in the streets."

- **Civil society member, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Early marriage is also viewed as a way to relieve the economic burden on families, particularly amid limited educational and economic opportunities.[217] A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor reported that "people … marry their daughter, especially if the husband is able to provide, to secure a better life for her".[218] Our research found that early marriage often precipitated girls' departure from school and, at the same time,

209 UN Population Fund (UNFPA), '**When Caged Birds Sing: Stories of Syrian Adolescent Girls**', December 2018.

210 'Child marriage' is defined as marriage under the age of 18. Some reports cite marriage even earlier: Norwegian Refugee Council, '**Syrian refugee girls: Married at the age of 13**' (2019), accessed July 24, 2022.

211 UNFPA, '**When Caged Birds Sing**'.

212 Mohamad Manar Hamijo and Rama Mohamad, '**Young girls married multiple times! UN Population Fund: Early marriage rises to 46% during in Syria during the crisis**', 11 March 2019.

213 Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

214 Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; KII, teacher (#3), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

215 Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

216 Interview, community leader (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

217 Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

218 Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

was seen as a solution to the lack of schooling available to girls.[219]

Increased responsibilities expose girls to new threats

Although it is traditional for women in northeast Syria to take charge of managing the house while men provide for the family,[220] the conflict and economic crisis have forced many women to become breadwinners and take on extra tasks, particularly when widowed, divorced, or if male family members are working far from home.[221] A community leader from eastern Deir ez-Zor explained that the complex, arduous, and time-consuming tasks of securing sufficient supplies of water, electricity, and fuel exposed girls to harassment or attack.[222] Some interviewees noted a discernible increase in open harassment of girls since the conflict.[223] These observations conform with other research on sexual and gender-based violence across Syria, showing that women and girls face persistent threats of sexual harassment and exploitation in their communities, including while accessing aid or buying and selling goods.[224]

"The war has forced tens of thousands of men, especially the young ones, to flee the region. Many of them thought that they will be able to bring their families once they settle down. But that was not possible. The women who are left behind have to become the men of the house. It is not easy."
- **Community leader, western Deir ez-Zor**

Restrictions on freedom of movement limit girls' options

Adult and adolescent respondents frequently said the conflict and Daesh had led to restrictions on the movement of adolescent girls, with many families prohibiting girls from leaving the home or going out unaccompanied in public. Like early marriage, this practice has long existed in northeast Syria, but it has grown in scale since the conflict began.[225]

Losing access to education has deprived many adolescent girls of one of their main justifications for leaving the house. Adult respondents spoke of the years of schooling many young girls have missed because of displacement and Daesh's control, which has left many illiterate and complicated the return to education.[226]

"As soon as girls turn ten, their parents stop sending them to school. The lack of security makes them scared of what might happen to her if she continues going to school."
- **Civil society member, western Deir ez-Zor**

Fear for the safety of girls was repeatedly cited as a reason for preventing girls from

219   KII, teacher (#1), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

220   Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

221   Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; see also Jazmati et al., **Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria**.

222   Interview, community leader (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

223   Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

224   UNFPA, '**Whole of Syria gender-based violence area of responsibility: Voices from Syria 2018 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview**', November 30, 2017, accessed July 24, 2022.

225   UNFPA, '**When Caged Birds Sing**'.

226   Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

attending school. A teacher from western Deir ez-Zor said that "People are scared for their girls between the ages of 12 and 18, [as] there have been multiple harassment and kidnapping incidents".[227]

Adult respondents highlighted the impact of these restrictions on adolescent girls' mental health – an observation confirmed in adolescent workshops.[228] One parent reported that many girls have become very depressed at the prospect of being confined to the house, perhaps indefinitely, especially when comparing their circumstances to those of Syrians outside the country.[229] UNFPA reports that adolescent girls are "at risk of depression and anxiety due to fear, isolation, and recurrent physical and emotional trauma".[230]

> *"We are a tribal community with strict traditions. Nonetheless, women were still able to study and work. But that is no longer the case. Girls are no longer allowed to leave the house. The community has become more conservative."*
>
> **- Civil society member, Raqqa**

> *"We need a miracle to be able to leave the house … being confined to the house creates a psychological pressure you cannot imagine."*
>
> **- Adolescent girl, Raqqa City**

Daesh's imprint: a 'hypermasculine' outlook

Across the research sites in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, adults spoke of the lasting impact of Daesh's ideology and worldview on adolescent behaviour and relationships.[231] Key to this is the emphasis on 'hypermasculinity' – defined by the legal scholar Angela Harris as "a masculinity in which the strictures against femininity and homosexuality are especially intense and in which physical strength and aggressiveness are paramount".[232]

The concept of hypermasculinity frames scholars' understanding of how violent extremist groups, including Daesh, mobilise followers for jihad.[233] The literature and our field research shows that Daesh systematically taught boys in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor – historically conservative and patriarchal communities – to adhere to hypermasculine gender roles from a young age. This has had a lingering impact on boys, their relationships with others, and society at large.

> *"My son is still behaving as if he is the head of the family, despite my presence. He wants his mother and sisters to dress and behave according to Daesh's instructions. He gets angry when I try to reason with him. I am scared that he will one day leave the house."*
>
> **- Father, Raqqa**

For example, Daesh instructed boys to play a dominant role in the home – assuming responsibility and enforcing decisions on

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227   Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

228   Workshop, girls/boys aged 15-18, Raqqa City, Nov-Dec 2021.

229   Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

230   UNFPA, '**When Caged Birds Sing**'.

231   KII, community leader (#2), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

232   Angela P. Harris, '**Gender, Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice**', *Stanford Law Review* 52, no. 4 (2000): 777–807, accessed September 4, 2022.

233   Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Masculinity, Jihad and Mobilization', *Just Security*, October 18, 2016, accessed July 24, 2022; Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles', *Women & Criminal Justice*, August 13, 2021, 1–21, accessed July 24, 2022.

other family members, particularly girls, even if this involved confrontations with their parents,[234] and scolding or punishing those who do not comply.[235] Some boys still try to impose Daesh's dress code on their sisters, even inside their homes.[236]

> "Many young girls, as young as eight years old, in my school are still wearing the muffler [the Daesh-mandated face covering]. We have been trying to engage with them and convince them to remove it, at least inside the classroom, but they refuse."
>
> - **Teacher, western Deir ez-Zor**

The legacy of Daesh also continues to shape the attitudes of some children in school. A teacher from western Deir ez-Zor claimed many children had been 'brainwashed' into believing that boys and girls playing together was *haram* (forbidden in Islam), with some children of opposite sexes no longer communicating.[237]Another teacher from western Deir ez-Zor said that some adolescents, particularly boys, often "abuse" other students who are not dressed according to their understanding of Sharia (it was unclear whether this was referring to physical and/or verbal abuse).[238] This teacher said that staff at her school had tried to combine the classes of young boys and girls, but that most boys refused to share a classroom with girls.[239] A third teacher from western Deir ez-Zor reported that adolescent boys had criticised her dress, arguing that it is *haram* for her to reveal her face to anyone other than her husband.[240]

These altered gender norms underpin adolescents' changing relationships with their families and peers, an issue we turn to in the next section.

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234 Interview, technical expert (#17), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

235 Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct Nov 2021; KII (#2), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021.

236 Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

237 Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

238 Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

239 Ibid.

240 Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

6. The conflict's toll on adolescent wellbeing and relationships

This section examines how conflict and Daesh have reshaped dynamics in the spaces that adolescents inhabit – home, communities, school, friendship groups, online – the spaces and places where their views on the world are forged. Violence has altered their relationships with family, friends, and wider communities, and undermined their wellbeing. Our research examined how these factors impact adolescent vulnerability to or resilience against violent extremism in northeast Syria.

Trauma cuts across the adolescent experience in northeast Syria – a result of exposure to conflict violence and other adverse childhood experiences. Displacement is a near-universal experience that has upended adolescents' lives, prompting feelings of loss, hardship, and isolation. Family and peer relationships are often stressed but remain an important pillar of support. The influence of family members and friends can alternately bolster adolescents' resilience or enable extremism. Community social cohesion has frayed, marked by the diminishing influence of traditional sources of resilience in adolescents' broader social networks.

Many adolescents we spoke to struggled to imagine a future beyond the challenges of the present – uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and the pressures of daily survival limit their capacity to dream and plan. In an environment of hopelessness, offers of belonging and ideological certainty by Daesh or other armed or illicit actors could prove compelling.

6.1 Years of violence have left a generation traumatised

The conflict in northeast Syria has had a debilitating effect on adolescent wellbeing and mental health. Adolescents and adults involved in this research repeatedly emphasised the pervasiveness of mental health issues such as anger, anxiety, depression, and signs of conflict trauma – with displacement and exposure to violence identified most frequently as causes.[241] Inadequate mental health services and cultural stigma around discussing mental health compound the crisis, leaving young people without sufficient support as they try to process traumatic experiences.

Numerous studies have highlighted the devastating effect of the conflict on adolescent mental health. Mercy Corps noted in 2019 the "unimaginable psychological toll" of pain and loss, and the prevalence of fear and despair among adolescents. "Adolescents have shown remarkable strength, but at a tremendous, often invisible cost – of stress, exhaustion … and ultimately diminished dreams."[242] Teachers interviewed for a 2021 study within schools in northeast Syria estimated that less than a quarter of students were "doing well psychologically".[243] The study highlighted widespread restlessness and difficulty in problem solving, and, among some children, anger, aggressiveness, and a failure to appreciate the consequences of their actions.

241 This report reflects observations and terms used by field research subjects. In many cases, field data on the subject of mental health may reflect lay interpretations and usage of specialist terms.

242 Alexandra Chen and Amie Wells, *Adolescence Lost: Forced Adulthood and a Fragile Future for Syria's Next Generation* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2019), p. 7, accessed September 4, 2022.

243 Mary Beth Wilson, **An Evaluation of Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing in Northeast Syria: Data from Children in Formal Schools** (Washington D.C.: USAID, 2021).

> *"My sons have become full of rage and aggression. They are always fighting with each other, as it is the only way they know to let it out. I cannot help them myself, so I allow them to do that. The alternative would be to let it out through other means, which would be way worse."*
>
> **- Parent, western Deir ez-Zor**

Technical experts interviewed for our study spoke of withdrawal among girls[244] and irritability and violence among boys – the latter compounded by a reluctance to share their feelings for fear of appearing unmasculine.[245] Adolescents were described as experiencing sleep disturbances and incontinence.[246] Save the Children observed these effects in a 2017 study on the effects of the Syrian conflict on children's mental health, which found that "children and adolescents have become more aggressive, and …
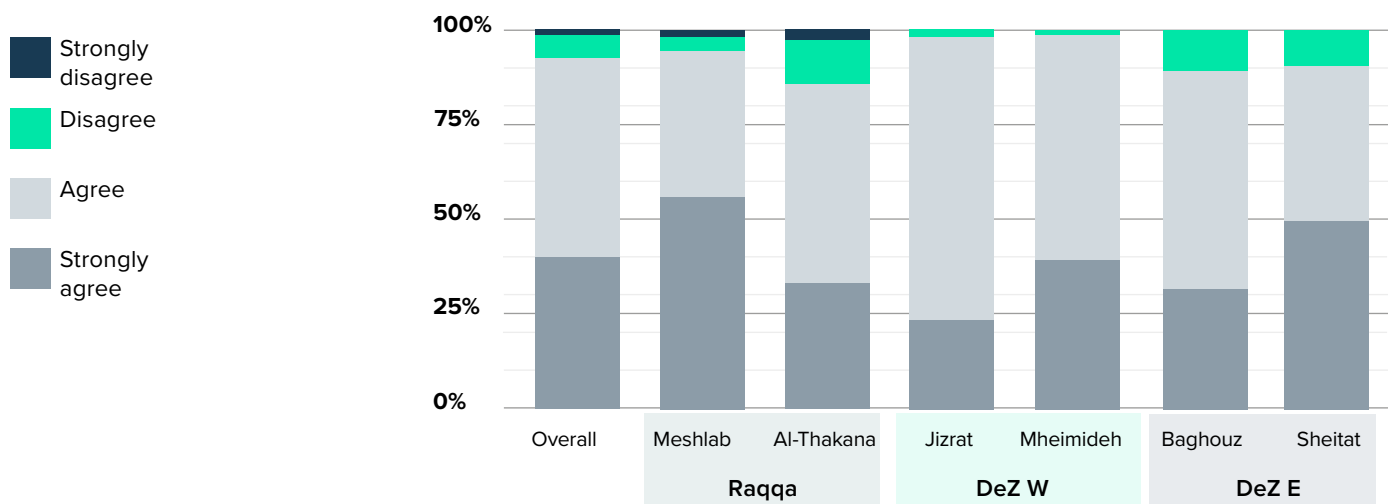
increasingly suffer from frequent bedwetting and involuntary urination – both common symptoms of toxic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among children".[247]

Nearly all adolescents in our survey (93%) agreed that the conflict provokes anxiety and depression among people their age (Figure 14).[248] The trauma they have experienced runs deep, and surfaces in myriad ways even during the current period of relative quiet; a parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor remarked that "even when [an adolescent] enters a school, he does not feel like he is in school. He sees it as a pile of rubble [that might collapse on him]".[249]

A 2021 study identified sources of stress among Syrian children that parallel those surfaced by this study, including: poverty and instability; absence from school; a lack of child-friendly spaces; caregiver

Figure 14: Conflict-driven anxiety and depression

Q: The conflict causes children my age to feel anxiety and depression

Legend: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

Categories: Overall | Meshlab, Al-Thakana (Raqqa) | Jizrat, Mheimideh (DeZ W) | Baghouz, Sheitat (DeZ E)

244 Interview, technical expert (#13), Oct-Nov 2021.

245 Interview, technical expert (#10), Oct-Nov 2021.

246 Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#10), Oct-Nov 2021.

247 Alun McDonald et al., *Invisible Wounds: The impact of six years of war on the mental health of Syria's children* (London: Save the Children UK, 2017), accessed July 24, 2022.

248 Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

249 Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

unemployment; witnessing traumatic conflict events; and displacement.[250]

Adult interviewees cited the impact on adolescents of prolonged exposure to violence during multiple phases of the conflict and the period of Daesh control.[251] Most adolescents have lost family members or those in their wider social networks due to the conflict: all 70 participants in the adolescent workshops had experienced this loss. Some adolescents have personally witnessed the death of loved ones, while many others have parents or other family members who were captured, imprisoned, or disappeared.[252]

Adults and adolescents frequently mentioned displacement and instability as key drivers of adolescent mental health issues. A parent from western Deir ez-Zor said his children "feel that they are at risk of fleeing the house at any moment",[253] while a teacher from Raqqa pointed out that "fear of the unknown" causes the most significant stress and anxiety for adolescents, limiting their ability to plan for the future.[254]

The scarcity of appropriately trained mental health professionals leaves young people – and Syrians more broadly – to cope with adversity without sufficient support. Before 2011, Syria had just 70 psychiatrists for a population of 22 million,[255] roughly one for every 314,300 people, compared to around one for every 1800 people in the UK.[256] Amid the upheaval of a decade of conflict, the availability of specialist services remains limited – among adult interviewees, only 21% reported the availability of places that offer psychosocial and other forms of mental health support to adolescents. Teachers and parents told us that the absence of mental health services left them without adequate options to address adolescent needs and tackle antisocial behaviour.[257]

The potential consequences of this lack of care can be grave. Misuse of prescription drugs as a coping mechanism is widespread in Syria, fuelled by the prevalence of conflict-related injuries and a lack of pharmaceutical regulations. Powerful pain medications have become cheap and easy to buy over the counter.[258] Children as well as adults are over-medicating, and some likely are turning to illicit narcotics as well.[259] The increase in mental health issues reportedly is contributing to rising suicide rates among adolescents, too.[260] Although reliable figures are unavailable for northeast Syria, recent research by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in northwest Syria found evidence of a rise in suicides "amid record levels of need".[261]

250 War Child Holland, *No Child Left Behind*.

251 Interview, community leader (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

252 Lifeline exercises in workshops; Interview, technical expert (#10), Oct-Nov 2021.

253 Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

254 Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

255 World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, **'Addressing the silent impact of war: WHO expands mental health care services across Syria'**, 26 March 2017, accessed July 24, 2022.

256 Statista, **'Annual number of psychologists in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2020 to 2021'**, 2021.

257 Interview, teacher (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

258 Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

259 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

260 Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#10), Oct-Nov 2021.

261 International Rescue Committee, **'New NW Syria data finds rise in suicides as needs rise – and UN Security Council to vote on cross-border aid'**, July 5, 2021, accessed July 24, 2022.

Traumatic experiences can shape vulnerability to violent extremism

XCEPT programme research underway through King's College London highlights potential linkages between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and vulnerability to violent extremism, among other potential negative outcomes.[262] The researchers posit that "Prolonged exposure to war and displacements, with constant fear and uncertainty, means that many children are in a state of 'toxic stress' … Social and economic factors [such as the level of social cohesion, access to resources, a sense of agency, and a sense of belonging] can strengthen or weaken the links between mental health, trauma, radicalisation, and violent extremism".

A 2017 evidence synthesis further assessed that "early traumatic experiences do not determine who will engage in violent extremism; rather they culminate in greater risk of involvement".[263] Although the evidence base for the connection between ACEs, mental health, and violent extremism is still nascent, linkages highlighted by these recent studies offer useful insights on one potential risk factor in Syria and other fragile and conflict-affected contexts.[264]

6.2 Lives upended by conflict-driven displacement

The near-universal experience of displacement in northeast Syria has fundamentally reshaped the lives of adolescents in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Since 2011, there have been several waves of displacement, mainly caused by Daesh and the Global Coalition-led campaign to defeat it, as well as regime-led airstrikes, tribal and opposition infighting, and a lack of security and livelihood opportunities.[265]

90% of adolescents surveyed reported fleeing their homes at least once since the start of the conflict in 2011 (Figure 15), although the past few years have brought some measure of stability. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those displaced reported living in the same neighbourhood or village for more than three years.

The trauma caused by displacement remains palpable. All adolescent workshop participants highlighted displacement as a key life event, citing the pain of this experience.[266] For many, it not only meant the loss of their homes, family members, and friends, but the beginning of a period of prolonged hardship and isolation. A parent in eastern Deir ez-Zor observed that "if and when they return, [adolescents] find their friends gone or dead and their families scattered".[267] Other adults discussed how displacement could heighten divisions within peer groups, with adolescents uncertain of the extent to which they can trust or rely on newly established friendships.[268]

262 Ted Barker and Heidi Riley, '**The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism**', XCEPT, July 22, 2022, accessed September 4, 2022.

263 Dylan O'Driscoll, '**Links between childhood experience of violence and violent extremism**', Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Helpdesk Report, December 15, 2017, accessed September 4, 2022.

264 Barker and Riley, '**The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism**'.

265 Schear et al., '**Stabilizing Eastern Syria After ISIS**'.

266 Adolescents were asked to draw their 'lifeline', highlighting key events and discussing their importance.
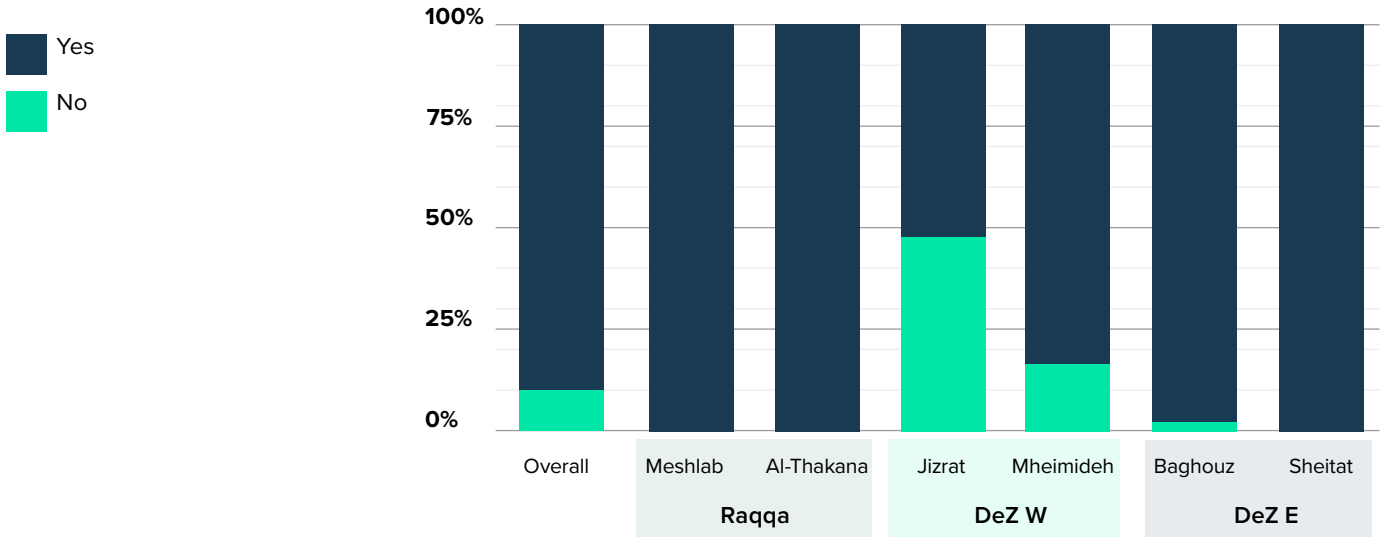
267 Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

268 Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

Figure 15: Displacement

Q: Have you been forced to flee your home since the start of the conflict in 2011?

One displaced adolescent spoke of his lack of friends in his new community; another said he no longer feels connected to his friends, who spend their days hanging out in the streets.[269]

> *"Displacement and instability are negatively impacting kids' ability to make new friendships. Fear of moving to another area is making them reluctant to talk, to make new friends or trust someone."*
>
> **- Parent, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Most adolescents view host communities as welcoming to displaced fellow Syrians, with slight variation depending on how recently respondents were displaced; adolescents living less than three years in their current location were marginally less positive about the openness of host communities (77% versus 90%). Adult interviewees were more critical of the treatment of IDPs and returnees,

mentioning discrimination, stigmatisation, and the tendency to blame IDPs for rising crime and overcrowding in schools.[270] An IDP from western Deir ez-Zor noted their child's fear of any dispute at school, amid concern that others at school and in the community would always side with those local to the area.[271]

> *"There is no stability in their [IDPs'] lives at all. At any moment, they can be kicked out. Even if they buy a house, if any problem occurs [they'll say] "you're not from here". The displaced person has no stability and no rights at any level."*
>
> **- Civil society member, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Thousands of adolescents remain in displaced persons camps, such as al-Hol and Roj, and other collective detention centres in northeast Syria, where living conditions are often dire.[272] Families who have been allowed to leave such

269 Workshop, girls/boys aged 15-18 from Raqqa City, Nov-Dec 2022.

270 Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; KII, civil society member (#4), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; see also Alexandra C. Hartman, Benjamin S. Morse, and Sigrid Weber, '**Violence, Displacement, and Support for Internally Displaced Persons: Evidence from Syria'**, June 2020, accessed July 24, 2022.

271 Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

272 Amnesty International, '**Syria: Repatriate at least 27,000 children held in dire conditions in north-east Syria**', November 30, 2021

camps (for example through tribal sponsorship programmes)[273] are not always warmly welcomed back to their home communities.[274] One expert interviewee claimed that "they are ostracised by the label that has been put on them as being affiliated with Daesh." He added that adolescent boys are viewed as posing the greatest threat, despite the circumstances of their alleged affiliation with Daesh – which for many is the result of their mother's forced marriage to a Daesh fighter.[275]

Returnees from al-Hol camp – where alleged Daesh fighters and their families are held – face particular challenges. Their property often is damaged or destroyed, opportunities for work are limited, and they face a climate of suspicion and social stigmatisation.[276] A group of adolescent boys (aged 15-18) taking part in a workshop generally viewed life under Daesh as easier than the difficult conditions they now face. All boys in this group were out of school and most of them did not have jobs.[277]

Adult and expert interviewees in most areas cited local opposition to reintegrating former al-Hol residents.[278] In areas with regular security incidents, such as in eastern Deir ez-Zor, suspicion runs particularly high.[279,280]

6.3 Family, peer, and community relationships re-written

The impacts of conflict and Daesh have reshaped how adolescents interact at home and in their communities. Many adolescents carry additional "responsibilities and concerns well beyond their age",[281] including as caregivers, breadwinners, heads of households, spouses, and even parents. Others have distanced themselves from their families; some parents report being unaware of their children's whereabouts for much of the day.

Adolescents generally expressed positive views on family and, to a lesser extent, peer relationships – possibly in an effort to avoid appearing critical (i.e. 'social desirability bias').[282] Adults, by contrast, tended to highlight the negative effects of the conflict on adolescent relationships. Overall, references to negative interactions, such as familial disputes and adolescent rebelliousness, surfaced more frequently, but there were clear examples of positive interactions, such as continued adolescent reliance on their parents for advice.

Family relationships under stress

Family dynamics have changed markedly since 2011. Most adolescents surveyed say they now "spend more time at home" (83%),

273 Haian Dukhan, 'Tribal Sponsorships Help Syrian Families Out of ISIS Camps, But Challenges Remain', Chatham House, December 2019.

274 Haid Haid, '**Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Transitional Justice for the Victims of ISIS in Syria**', Chatham House, April 2020.

275 Interview, technical expert (#17), Oct-Nov 2021; see also Chatham House, '**Tribal Sponsorships Help Syrian Families Out of ISIS Camps, But Challenges Remain',** December 2019, accessed July 24, 2022.

276 Sofia Barbarani, '**Leaving Syria's notorious al-Hol camp, civilians find little to go home to**', *The New Humanitarian*, January 14, 2021, accessed July 24, 2022.

277 Workshop, boys aged 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021. Though not the focus of this study, a workshop was held with adolescent IDPs facing the stigma of perceived affiliation with Daesh to enable comparison.

278 Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#25), Oct-Nov 2021.

279 Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

280 Attitudes toward IDP returnees differ based on where they return from. If coming from Daesh-held areas, they often are seen as possible sleeper cell members; if from regime-held areas, they may be viewed as informants.

281 Chen and Wells, *Adolescence Lost*.

282 'Social desirability bias' refers to the propensity for respondents to provide answers they think will be socially acceptable. It often occurs when broaching sensitive or controversial topics.

"do more to help [their] family" (80%), and "rely more on [their] family" (79%) – a likely result of restrictions on freedom of movement due to security risks and shifts in familial responsibilities.

Adolescents surveyed likewise said they rely most on their parents for advice and support – far surpassing the figures for siblings (50%), other relatives (36%), and friends (27%), as Figure 16 illustrates. This would seem to imply strong familial bonds. However, some divergence between adolescent responses in the survey – when their parents or caregivers were often in the room – and more negative views shared in workshops[283] suggests survey responses on this question may have been skewed by the presence of a family member.

Most (88%) adult interviewees, by contrast, cited negative impacts of the conflict on

family dynamics. The loss or injury of parents, siblings, and extended family members, and the need to cope with prolonged economic crisis, are the primary sources of stress.
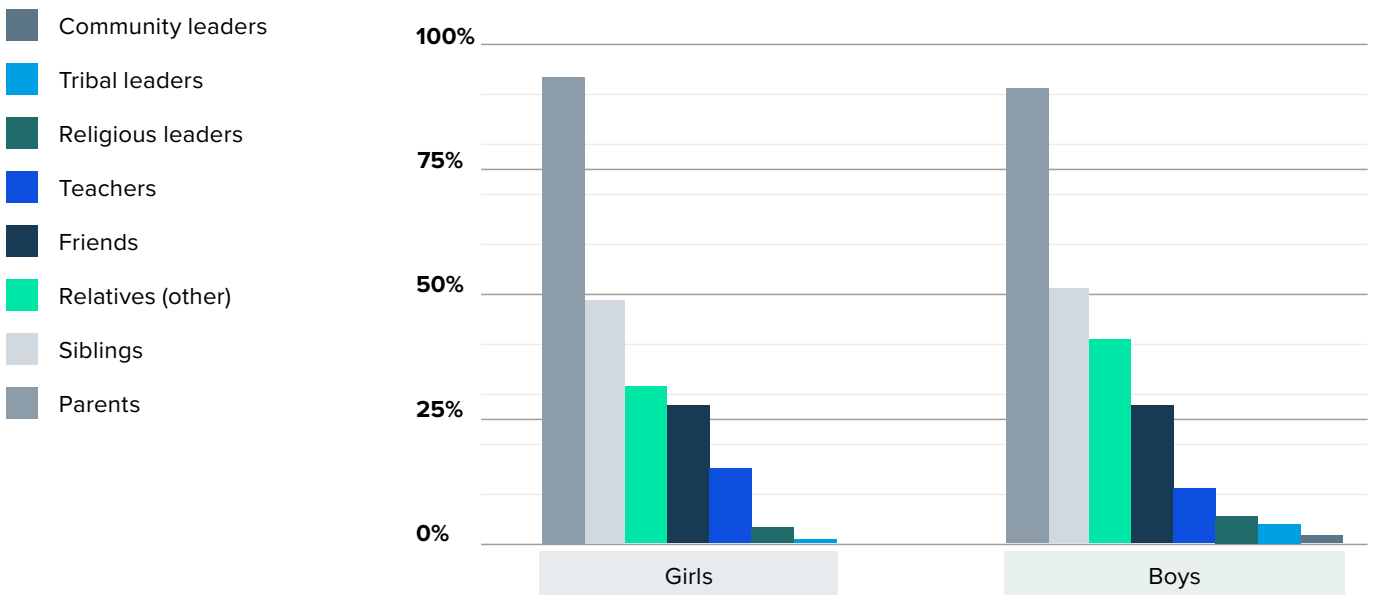
> *"A friend of mine is going through hell with her [adolescent] boy. He wants her to give him money to be smuggled out of Syria, but she cannot afford that. As a result, he keeps fighting with everyone and breaks stuff in the house, which is making their life very difficult."*
>
> **- Civil society member, eastern Deir ez-Zor**

Adult interviewees discussed how the conflict has altered traditional patterns of parental oversight. Many parents – particularly fathers – spend far less time with their children.[284] Some parents say they have essentially 'lost

Figure 16: Personal support

Q: Who do you turn to for advice or help?

Legend:
- Community leaders
- Tribal leaders
- Religious leaders
- Teachers
- Friends
- Relatives (other)
- Siblings
- Parents

---

283 Several adolescent workshop participants said the conflict had negatively affected their family units, with none reporting positive or neutral sentiments.

284 Interview with a teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

control' of their children.[285] A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor observed that "boys leave their homes in the morning and do not return until late afternoon", and "spend their days on the street with no parental control".[286] A parent from western Deir ez-Zor complained her older adolescent boys "do not do to what I tell them. Sometimes they do not even respond when I talk to them. I do not know what to do anymore".[287] One parent noted that older siblings less routinely assist with caring for their younger brothers and sisters, as was previously the custom.[288]

In an attempt to protect their children, some parents impose limits on their freedom, keeping them at home.[289] However, comments from adult and adolescent respondents alike suggests that such measures may contribute to depression and other mental health issues among adolescents, while also increasing tensions between family members.[290,291]

> *"My sister and I need to come up with a hundred different reasons to be able to leave the house and get some fresh air. Staying at home all day everyday creates psychological stress to an extent you cannot imagine."*
>
> **- Adolescent girl, Raqqa**

Adult interviewees cited a rising trend of violence within the home – due to both adolescent aggression and parental abuse. Nearly a quarter (23%) of adults spoke about increased disputes and even physical violence, such as adolescent boys taking out their anger physically on other family members. A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor said that "I met many girls who were regularly beaten up by their brothers, and no one is doing anything to stop them. I also know an adolescent who hits his mum every time he is angry with her".[292] A teacher from Raqqa said, "my children are always fighting, despite all my attempts to change their behaviour" – adding, "violence is all they know".[293] According to a community leader from eastern Deir ez-Zor, more adolescents are running away from home because of fights with parents or due to physical or emotional abuse.[294]

Multiple adult interviewees said adolescents are often victims of domestic violence.[295] A teacher from Raqqa observed that "economic pressure is impacting the mental health of the parents", adding, "the father who cannot secure food for his family goes home angry and lashes out at the kids or the wife".[296] One expert interviewee shared: "my research showed that some children have engaged with Daesh to escape from the domestic violence they are experiencing at home".[297]

285 Interview, parent (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4) in Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

286 Interview, civil society member (#2) in Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West) Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

287 Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

288 Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

289 Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

290 Workshop, girls/boys aged 15-18, Raqqa City, December 2021.

291 Interview, parent (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

292 Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

293 Interview, teacher (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

294 Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

295 Interview, teacher (#1), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

296 Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

297 Interview, technical expert (#12), Oct-Nov 2021.

"Students who suffer from domestic violence tend to behave violently. They think that violence is the only way to solve disputes. That is because they repeat the same behaviour they experience at home."

- **Teacher, Raqqa**

Friendship networks a mainstay amid upheaval, but also an arena of discord

Friendship networks remain important avenues for adolescents to navigate the normal stresses of their age and the abnormal pressures of prolonged crisis and conflict. Our research suggests that growing up amid conflict has prompted adolescents to cleave more closely to friends – when circumstances allow these connections to remain stable – but also leads them to more frequently unleash anger, frustration and fear among their peers.

A majority (58%) of adolescents surveyed believe the conflict has forged more close friendships, and half (50%) said they trust their friends more. However, when asked with whom they spend their free time, friends were cited less often than parents and siblings (Figures 17 and 18) – a result that would appear to track with the constraints on movement in an unstable and insecure environment. In workshops, adolescents shared how having good friends helped them cope with difficult times, including three who said their friends play an important role in supporting them to achieve their dreams.[298]

As with the data on family relationships, adult interviewees paint a very different picture than adolescent survey respondents. Every adult believed the conflict negatively affected adolescents' relationship with their peers.[299] Nearly half (48%) of adults claimed that aggression between adolescents had increased: a teacher from eastern Deir ez-Zor said that even relatively trivial comments could escalate to physical or verbal violence between friends.[300] A parent from Raqqa said that "there are no more real friendships among adolescents", adding that "they are always fighting and sometimes they fall out and never come back".[301]

Differing adolescent and adult perceptions on the state of relations among adolescents may reflect adolescents' ability to maintain close friendships despite recurrent tensions. The data points to the centrality of friendships for adolescents as they navigate life amid crisis.

Families and friends as havens in crisis and crucibles for shaping adolescent worldview

The seeming contradiction between how adolescents view family and peer relationships and how adults perceive them highlights the complex role of family, friends, and peers during adolescence. Their influence is critical to shaping adolescents' worldviews, their behaviour toward others, and their ability to cope with challenges. This influence can work in both directions; it can be a source of

298 Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls/boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021.

299 Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East) Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.
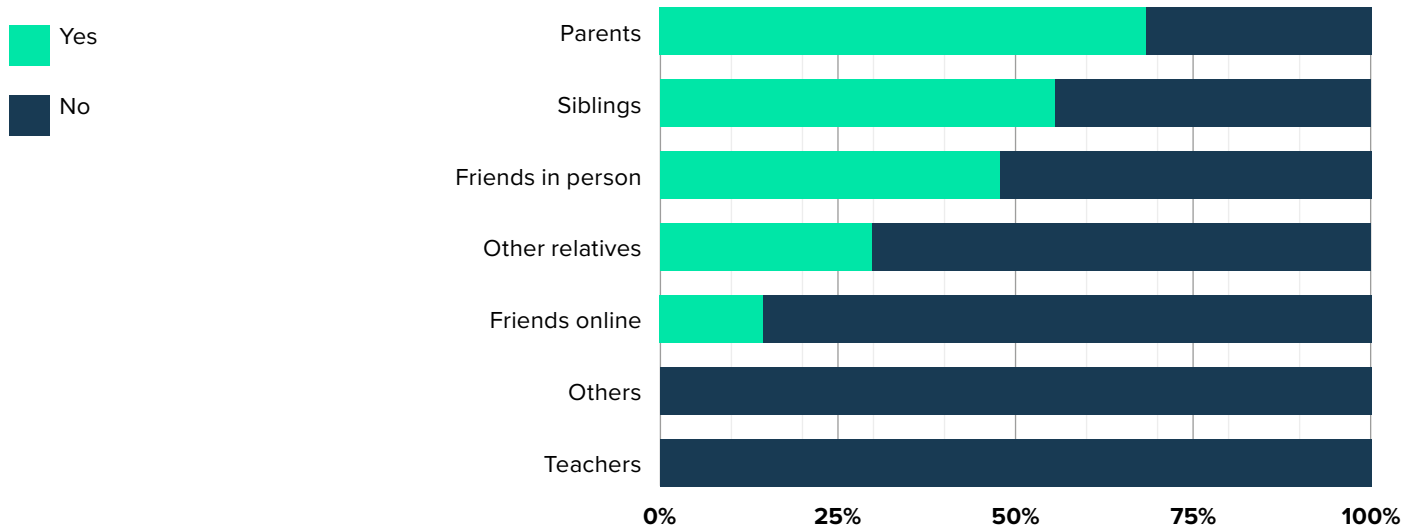
300 Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021

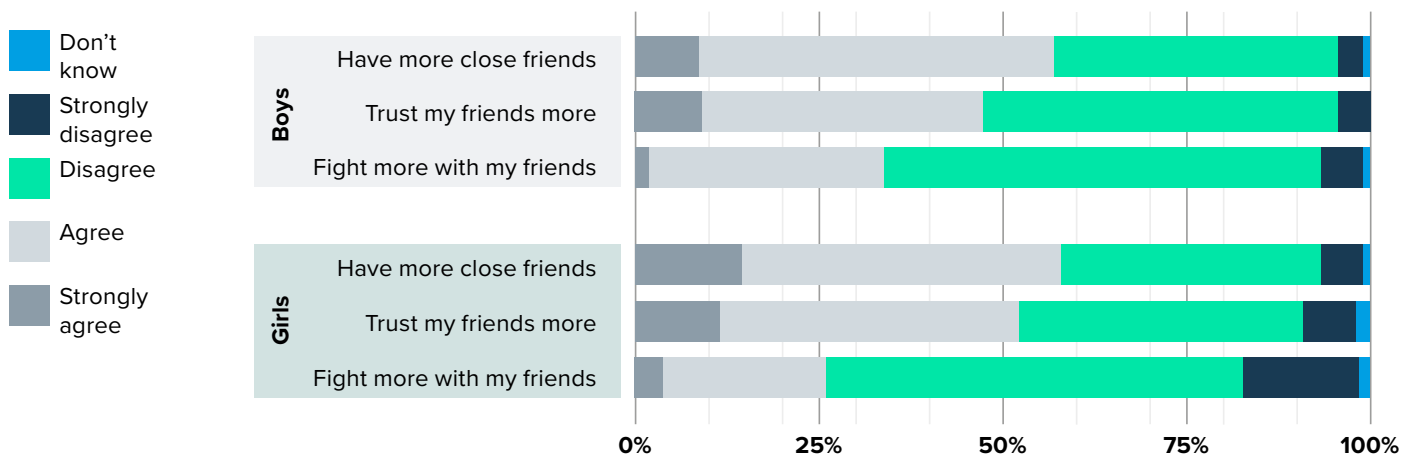301 Interview, parent (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

Figure 17: Personal associations

Q: When you have free time, who do you primarily spend time with?

- ■ Yes
- ■ No

Parents | Siblings | Friends in person | Other relatives | Friends online | Others | Teachers

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Figure 18: Impact of conflict on adolescent relationships

Q: The conflict causes me to ...

- ■ Don't know
- ■ Strongly disagree
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Agree
- ■ Strongly agree

Boys
- Have more close friends
- Trust my friends more
- Fight more with my friends

Girls
- Have more close friends
- Trust my friends more
- Fight more with my friends

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

resilience against corrupting forces (such as violent extremism) or a conduit toward it. As Revkin observes:

> Individual decisions to join armed groups are rarely made in a vacuum, but are heavily influenced by pre-existing social and familial networks … Sometimes, adults who already belong to a NSAG will encourage their children to join in order to enhance their perceived loyalty and status within the organization.[302]

A majority (63%) of adolescents surveyed agreed that sympathy for or involvement with Daesh among their peers is 'influenced by people they know' (see Figure 10, p. 37). Adolescent workshop participants cited the central role of family and friends in propelling those their age toward Daesh.[303] An adolescent boy from eastern Deir ez-Zor described how the decision by one youth to join would trigger a cascade in which he "starts telling his siblings, cousins and friends about it [Daesh] to convince them to join".[304]

"The family, and especially the father and mother of the child, are the most important part of the child's support system. Children who feel supported by their parents, especially emotionally, are usually less vulnerable to Daesh than those who are ignored or mistreated in their homes … The kids who find support at home, do not look for it elsewhere."

- Parent, eastern Deir ez-Zor

Three-quarters (76%) of adults interviewed stressed the importance of familial influence in steering children towards or away from radicalisation. A parent from western Deir ez-Zor emphasised parental persuasion as key to propelling adolescent sympathy or involvement with groups such as Daesh. More frequently, adult interviewees highlighted how family interactions and upbringing can deter support for Daesh or other armed groups.[305] There is some evidence in the literature to support this, including reports of children leaving Daesh following direct familial intervention.[306]

Adult interviewees and several experts highlighted that parents' ability to mitigate extremist influence on their children depends on positive dynamics within the home and the level of parental engagement – a useful flag for how critical it may be to address reports of rising tensions within families and the difficulties parents are facing as they try to keep track of their adolescent children's activities.

Parental involvement is not a failsafe, however. Adult interviewees cited cases of adolescents engaging with Daesh despite strong parental opposition.[307] The limitations of parental influence also were apparent during the period of Daesh control, when many adolescents rebelled against their parents' wishes by becoming involved with the group.[308]

302 Revkin, **'"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"'**.

303 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls/boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021

304 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), Nov-Dec 2021.

305 Interview, parent (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

306 Revkin, **'"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"'**.

307 Interview, civil society member (#3), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

308 Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

Social cohesion as a source of community resilience

Strengthening social cohesion[309] has become a central pillar of programming to support peacebuilding and violence prevention, including preventing or countering violent extremism (PCVE).[310] Efforts to build trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging and shared purpose within groups ('bonding ties') and between them ('bridging ties') are premised on the assessment that improved social cohesion creates pathways for mediating and mitigating the frictions that fuel armed violence.[311] Among individuals, high levels of social cohesion have been shown to lower the risk for post-traumatic stress and support pro-social behaviour, including among perpetrators of violence.[312] At the group level, deeper understanding, dialogue, interaction, and interdependency enhances the ability of societies and states to adapt to change and peacefully meet challenges.[313]

To address the multiple drivers of conflict at individual, group, and structural levels, social cohesion needs be strengthened both vertically (between groups and states) and horizontally (within and across groups).[314] In Section 5, we highlighted risk factors exacerbated by the disconnect between the governing authority in northeast Syria (the AANES) and local communities in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and how these risks translate into adolescent vulnerability. Here, we address adolescent interactions within

their communities, an important arena for strengthening their resilience against violent extremism. As Iffat Idris notes in a 2019 evidence review:

> The retreat of Daesh from territories under its control, notably in Iraq and Syria, has created a massive challenge of bringing about integration between divided communities, notably populations seen as having collaborated with the group, former combatants, and those who suffered persecution or were displaced because of Daesh. Failure to bring about social cohesion carries the real risk of renewed extremism, violence and conflict. Social cohesion can help PCVE by building relationships and reducing the marginalisation that is a potential driver of extremism.[315]

Recent research on the links between strengthened social cohesion and prevention of violent extremism in northeast Syria and elsewhere further highlights the importance of accounting for variations among clan, tribe, and ethnic interactions at the local level,[316] and focusing on programming that builds trust and encourages positive interactions across group lines, versus simply more interaction.[317]

Our field research echoed other findings on the relevance of social cohesion for PCVE in northeast Syria. Among adult interviewees, 36% spoke of the importance of social cohesion as a resilience factor against Daesh. A community leader from western Deir ez-Zor linked the importance of "living in harmony with your family, your neighbours, and your tribe" to the fact that it raises society's

309 We apply the OECD definition of social cohesion as "A cohesive society [that] works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility." OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*, 2011.

310 See, for example, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ***Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*** (New York: UNDP, 2020).

311 Ada Sonnenfeld et al., ***Strengthening intergroup social cohesion in fragile situations*** (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, 2021).

312 Barker and Riley, '***The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism***'.

313 UNDP, *Strengthening social cohesion*, p 12.

314 Julia Leininger et al, ***Social Cohesion: A New Definition and A Proposal for its Measurement in Africa*** (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2021).

315 Iffat Idris, '***Community cohesion projects to prevent violent extremism***', (GSDRC, October 2019), accessed July 24, 2022.

316 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), ***Social Cohesion in Support of Deradicalisation and the Prevention of Violent Extremism: Programming Entry Points in North-East Syria*** (COAR, 2022).

317 Mercy Corps, '***Understanding the Links Between Social Cohesion and Violence: Evidence from Niger***' (Portland: Mercy Corps, March 2021).

awareness and ability to detect Daesh activities, especially when carried out by outsiders. The ability of certain tribal leaders – as well as religious leaders, civil society workers, and other prominent community figures – to promote wellbeing is important, too, said another community leader from western Deir ez-Zor.[318] It plays a critical role in social cohesion by preventing vulnerable families from seeking financial help from groups such as Daesh, he explained.

Adolescents integrated into cohesive societies are better positioned to absorb the social norms of their communities.[319] Social norms, such as a communal rejection of violent extremism, can be influenced by community members who are perceived to have authority or the respect of others – presenting an opportunity to advance counter-extremist norms within society. Conversely, adolescents who feel marginalised by their communities may reject the prevailing social norms within it and seek alternative avenues for fostering a sense of community or belonging.

Our research indicates substantial variation in social cohesion across the sites studied. For example, Sheitat is viewed as relatively cohesive because the tribe here comprises two or three major families, and members tend to know each other – which may help explain the tribe's ability to maintain a united stance against Daesh, even when the group was territorially dominant.[320] In comparison, social cohesion is considered weaker in al-Thakana, in the centre of Raqqa City, due to the neighbourhood's urban nature and the presence of people from different locations and backgrounds, which in some cases feeds existing tribal rivalries.[321]

Tribes as enablers or mitigators of violent extremism

Familial and social networks can help propel adolescent engagement with Daesh or prevent it. The potential for these networks to influence adolescent behaviour either way is particularly pronounced in areas where tribal structures remain strong. A 2021 report on Daesh published by IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development offers evidence in both directions.[322] It includes a study on Daesh's use of social networks in Deir ez-Zor, and its continued ability to exploit tribal networks to foment "tension and unrest … and further deepen the schism between governing mechanisms and residents".[323] A second study on the socioeconomic factors impacting extremism alternatively highlights clan and tribal networks as a counterweight to Daesh's manipulation of the human need for belonging – a need that adolescents feel acutely:

> [Daesh's] desire to fulfil the individual need to belong to a group and a certain ideology plays a weak role in the spread of … violent extremism, as clan and family loyalty continues to 'satisfy' the need for the people of the region [NES] to be part of a homogeneous group pursuing a specific goal.[324]

318   Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

319   Barker and Riley, **'The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism'**.

320   Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

321   Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

322   Jazmati et al., **Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria**.

323   Jazmati, 'Paper IV: Extremist Groups Approach Toward Social Structures'.

324   Zaki Mehchy, 'Paper III: Socioeconomic factors of violent extremism in North East Syria', in Jazmati et al., **Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria**, 58-81.

Despite erosion of the traditional role of tribal leaders in northeast Syria since the conflict, they remain a pillar of social relations and source of considerable influence, particularly among tribe members still residing in their areas of origin.[325] Respondents in all areas cited the capacity of tribal and religious leaders to sway their communities in either direction.[326] A civil society worker from western Deir ez-Zor noted their ability to shape community perceptions and behaviours, commenting that "whatever direction the tribal Sheikh goes, the rest of the tribe follows".[327] A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor averred "the word of tribal leaders is implemented by everyone", adding that "adolescents are scared of joining Daesh against the will of their leaders, due to fears of being [an] outcast".[328]

Adolescents' search for a sense of belonging

Adolescents are forging their individual and communal identities in the context of upended family, peer, and community relations in northeast Syria. In their search for belonging, feelings of marginalisation, discrimination, and a lack of agency or purpose can push some towards Daesh.[329] As Jessica Darden notes in a study on social drivers of radicalisation:

Terrorist groups can position themselves as an alternative community that promises young people a voice, sense of belonging, and opportunity to participate in something greater than themselves.[330]

Vale discusses how Daesh lured children through symbols of status and the promise of belonging:

> Symbols of group membership – including uniforms, weapons, and gifts … fuelled peer pressure to conform to and join the privileged 'in-group'. Combining rewards of status and camaraderie, the group exploited children's desire for a sense of purpose and belonging. Through social bonding, physical adventure, and ideological purification, with roles for even the youngest recruits, IS [Daesh] sent a clear message that it valued Syria and Iraq's children.[331]

A third (33%) of adolescents surveyed agreed that active engagement with Daesh among others their age could be driven by a desire for "belonging". In the workshops with adolescents, however, belonging was not mentioned as an important driver[332] – possibly because the concept is somewhat less 'intuitive' as a driver than ideology or material incentives like economic need.[333]

A quarter (27%) of adult interviewees agreed that adolescents may be more likely to join Daesh if they are poorly treated by their families, including being dismissed, embarrassed, abused, and so on, with Daesh able to offer an alternative 'family'. A civil society worker from eastern Deir ez-Zor observed that this may also apply to those

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325 Tribal leaders in northeast Syria are known to be pragmatic, adapting to prevailing power structures to preserve their influence – including to Daesh during its rule. Daesh's military defeat, the security risks stemming from association with the group, and strong negative experiences of its rule would discourage any tribal leaders from demonstrating continued support for the group.

326 Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; KII, teacher (#3), 'high violent extremism' area, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3) in Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#4) in Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

327 Interview, civil society member (#4), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

328 Interview, civil society member (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021;

329 Royal United Services Institute, **Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction**.

330 Darden, '**Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth'.**

331 Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den*.

332 Workshop, boys aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, girls/boys aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), Nov-Dec 2021; Workshop, boys aged 15-18 from al-Hol, Nov-Dec 2021.

333 James Khalil, 'A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists'.

who have lost their parents – as such, children are often marginalised in the community.[334]

6.4 Adolescent hopes for the future clouded by uncertainty

For thousands of adolescents and their caregivers across northeast Syria, the conflict continues to dampen their hopes for the future, with some struggling to think beyond their present reality.

Adolescent survey respondents generally expressed optimism about the future. By contrast, both adolescents and adults whom we interviewed painted a more pessimistic picture, citing a lack of education and employment prospects, and ongoing security issues. Separately, a 2021 evaluation of psychosocial support programmes in northeast Syrian schools found that "children self-report having more hope for the future than their caregivers" on a range of indicators linked to hopes for the future.[335]

Over two-thirds (68%) of adolescents surveyed agreed that they can achieve their "dreams and goals", although optimism was greater in Raqqa City than in Deir ez-Zor (Figure 19). Younger respondents were more positive on this measure than older adolescents (75% of adolescents between ages 12-14 agreed versus 64% of those between ages 15-18).

A limited number of participants in the adolescent workshops spoke positively about the future. For example, two older adolescent participants from Raqqa City (a boy and

a girl) shared their aspirations to become doctors – with the girl declaring she aimed to become so renowned that she could afford to treat people for free.[336] Both cited access to quality education as the biggest obstacle to achieving their dreams. Another adolescent from the same workshop talked of playing professional football, but acknowledged his dream depended on leaving Syria for greater opportunities in Europe.

> "I gave up on thinking about the future [as] thinking about it every day made me miserable."
>
> **- Adolescent girl, Raqqa**

More commonly, adolescent workshop participants were pessimistic in their outlook. An older adolescent girl from eastern Deir ez-Zor said her main daily hope is to avoid losing another family member. "We don't think of anything else, not the future, not anything", she said.[337] A female participant from Raqqa said it was easier to "just focus on my daily routine of waking up, doing my house duties, and entertaining myself, whenever possible".[338] The older adolescent boys who participated in the workshop for returnees from al-Hol camp were arguably the least optimistic, with most at a loss for how to respond to questions about their future aspirations.

> "If we had the 9th-grade diploma or a high school diploma, it might have been possible to have a job or work, but now there is no work, no education, and no school."
>
> **- Adolescent boy, al-Hol returnee**

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334 Interview, civil society member (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

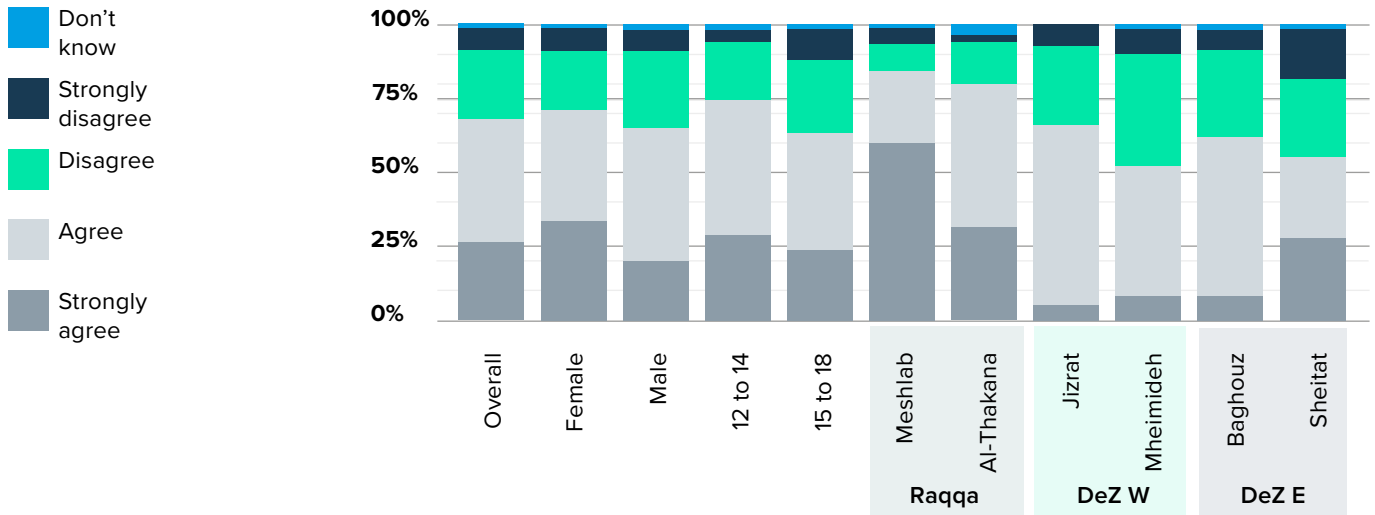335 Wilson, An Evaluation of Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing.

336 Workshop, girls/boys aged 15-18, Raqqa City, December 2021.

337 Workshop, girls aged 15-18, Deir ez-Zor (East), December 2021.

338 Workshop, girls/boys aged 15-18, Raqqa City, December 2021.

Figure 19: Hopes for the future

Q: I believe that I can achieve my dreams and goals

Adults see adolescents as trapped by the conflict's devastation

Adult interviewees were largely downbeat about prospects for adolescents.[339] They spoke of the lack of schools, vocational training, or livelihood opportunities, and the general stagnation in life opportunities – dubbed "waithood".[340] They cited ongoing instability as a driver of adolescent feelings of insecurity and a loss of hope, exacerbated by fears of the return of Daesh or regime control.[341] "The constant feeling of fear and instability among adolescents makes the future distant or unreal", said a teacher from western Deir ez-Zor.[342] Such hopelessness breeds apathy. A civil society worker from

Raqqa said "Adolescents do not think about the future and they do not plan. They try to survive one day at a time".[343] Others observed that perpetual uncertainty makes it difficult for adolescents to articulate a future vision that looks beyond current conflict conditions.[344] This chimes with Revkin's research among former child members of non-state armed groups, in which "many Syrian children find it impossible to imagine a non-violent future as long as the conflict is ongoing".[345]

"Young people cannot think of the future because they do not know what will happen tomorrow or the day after. For example, even if education is available, one might think that it is not worth pursuing as he might soon be

339　Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, teacher (#3), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

340　Interview, teacher (#3), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, civil society member (#2), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, community leader (#1), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

341　Interview, parent (#2), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#5), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021; Workshop, girls aged 12-14, Deir ez-Zor (West), December 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

342　Interview, teacher (#2), Deir ez-Zor (West), Oct-Nov 2021.

343　Interview, civil society member (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

344　Interview, technical expert (#12), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview with a parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.

345　Mara Revkin, **"'I Am Nothing Without a Weapon'"**.

displaced. These are not pure speculations, because they do actually happen."

- **Community leader, Raqqa**

A parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor stated that "when we used to ask our son about his ambitions, he would say he wants to be a doctor or an engineer; now he wants to be an airplane pilot and he wants to fight".[346] Others said adolescents often view leaving the country as the only feasible way to ensure a better future for themselves. A parent from Raqqa said that children as young as six ask their parents to send them to Europe because "they can't live here like this".[347] Another parent from eastern Deir ez-Zor observed that "My teenage children keep asking me to allow them to travel, despite the huge risks involved … this is how desperate they have become".[348]

"None of the things that could give hope for a better future are available here. There are no job or education opportunities. One used to be able to study in order to build their future and become a doctor, an engineer, or a teacher. However, now either education is not available, or the quality is very bad. Either way, kids lack the means to become what they want."

- **Parent, western Deir ez-Zor**

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346 Interview, parent (#4), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.
347 Interview, parent (#4), Raqqa City, Oct-Nov 2021.
348 Interview, teacher (#1), Deir ez-Zor (East), Oct-Nov 2021.

7. Considerations for programming in northeast Syria

This study set out to understand the impact of a decade of armed conflict and violent extremism on adolescents in the northeast Syrian governorates of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The research aims to inform efforts to support recovery and prevent resurgent violence and violent extremism – with a particular focus on programme interventions in the formal and non-formal education spheres. The picture of adolescent life that emerges from our research and other studies of northeast Syria is stark. Today's adolescents have lived through violence, upheaval, and dislocation. They continue to navigate instability, economic crisis, disrupted education, and fractured relationships, leaving them worried about their families and uncertain about their futures.

Evidence from the literature indicates an accumulation of negative and traumatic experiences over time can lead children to increased risk of misconduct, potential violence, or other negative outcomes. Violent extremism is only one possible consequence of exposure to conflict and armed violence. Adolescents also are at risk of PTSD, depression, drug abuse, criminality, and other forms of violence or negative behaviours.[349]

There is no set pathway that leads an adolescent towards violent extremism in northeast Syria. A range of factors at the individual and community levels can combine to strengthen the link between adolescent trauma and vulnerability to radicalisation or build resilience against it – and the mix of factors may vary depending on the individual and context.[350] Nonetheless, the views shared by adolescents and adults in the communities studied highlight some common issues heightening adolescent vulnerability:

- **Trauma, compounded by a scarcity of psychosocial support services**, cuts across the adolescent experience and undermines both individual and communal resilience.

- **Social cohesion is frayed**, with traditional sources of resilience – such as family and peer relationships or the roles of tribal and religious leaders in society – strained and diminishing.

- **Adolescents' sense of agency, belonging, and hope for the future are key** to strengthening resilience but undercut by marginalisation, exclusion, and disrupted pathways towards intellectual, economic, and social development.

This chapter translates the field data on adolescent experiences and perceptions into considerations for programming. It sets out a range of factors to consider in developing PCVE interventions and shares initial lessons from pilot programming in northeast Syria. The challenge for donors is one of prioritisation. With a broad and variable range of factors to address, limited resources will be stretched to meet the need for multi-layered approaches and achieve measurable results that are sustainable and scalable.

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349 O'Driscoll, *Links between children experience of violence and violent extremism*; Barker and Riley, '**The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism**'.

350 Ibid.

7.1 Setting the frame for PCVE programming

A wide range of measures can contribute towards achieving PCVE objectives.[351] Although not always framed as such, programmes under the PCVE umbrella can include interventions that directly or indirectly address the drivers of violence or contribute to community or individual resilience.[352]

A comprehensive 'programme mapping' was beyond the scope of this study. However, the research highlighted the breadth of interventions in northeast Syria currently supported by international donors.[353] Relatively few are explicitly aimed toward PCVE but many advance the same objectives. Categories of interventions in northeast Syria that broadly address the risk factors highlighted by this research include:

- **Service delivery and infrastructure initiatives.** If equitably distributed and accompanied by transparent decision-making, interventions associated with conflict stabilisation and recovery may help address perceptions of exclusion and poor governance that act as structural motivators of violence.

- **Vocational training and livelihood support.** Successful interventions of this nature can offset the potential material incentives and lure of Daesh or other extremist actors, provided there are opportunities to apply the skills gained and resources offered.

- **Social cohesion initiatives.** Programming to bridge gaps between communities and repair relations and social networks frayed

by protracted instability may reduce the extent to which stigmatisation or revenge contribute to sympathy for or involvement in violence.

- Other initiatives identified in northeast Syria as advancing PCVE include **formal and non-formal education, civic education and participation, and return and reintegration initiatives** for those displaced by the conflict.

Programming in northeast Syria also includes interventions that specifically target individuals deemed to be 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' to becoming involved in violent extremism, as well as those identified as current or former Daesh members. These programmes include establishment of community centres and safe spaces; psychosocial support; child protection services and case management; and interventions aimed at de-radicalisation. Details on such activities are limited and coordination among service providers is minimal, in part due to security concerns and the need to protect sensitive programmes and participants. They tend to be delivered by local NGOs working with the AANES authorisation, and are centred on IDP camps housing alleged former Daesh members, such as al-Hol. Local organisations point to numerous challenges in programme implementation, including: limited funding and resources to support effective PCVE, deradicalisation, and rehabilitation programming; the absence of a coherent and coordinated strategy among donors, the AANES, and implementing organisations; interference by militias and tribal leaders; and difficulty accessing at-risk individuals once they return to their home communities.[354]

351 Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen, **"The Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism"**.

352 Some donors and implementers avoid overtly labelling activities as PCVE due to the risk of extremist retaliation or concerns over associating humanitarian or development assistance with counter-terrorism efforts.

353 Interview, technical expert (#5), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#8), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#9), Oct-Nov 2021; Interview, technical expert (#20), Oct-Nov 2021.

354 COAR Global, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

Developing effective, integrated PCVE strategies

Although donors have invested considerable resources to determine 'what works' in PCVE programming, publicly available evidence remains scarce. A recent review of literature on the effectiveness of PCVE interventions among youth highlights that "the field has been criticised for being overly reactive, externally imposed, infringing on civil liberties (including the right to privacy), targeting specific communities, and increasing risk of stigma".[355] The study notes:

> Practice has remained poorly evidenced, lacking robustness in design or evaluation. The impact of interventions is rarely well described, and the effectiveness of different approaches or programmes remains largely unmeasured … Efforts can be criticised for lacking well-developed theories of change and for being over-reliant on anecdotal evidence, exposing the field to a range of practical, conceptual, and ethical problems.

The scarcity of meaningful evidence often is exacerbated by concerns among donors and implementers about revealing sensitive material or proprietary approaches, as well as by methodological difficulties relating to evaluation design and data collection. As a result, PCVE programming – whether or not explicitly labelled as such – incorporates varied, largely disconnected initiatives without a unified approach to enable integration of individual, community, and structural PCVE objectives.

Looking for 'what works' locally

The absence of a set pathway toward violent extremism – and the varying combination of factors that may propel it – requires that efforts to determine 'what works' in PCVE avoid drawing broad conclusions and instead ask "what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how?"[356] A successful programme in one community may not deliver results in another or may even make the situation worse.

For instance, efforts to address service-related grievances may be more likely to deliver a positive PCVE effect in Meshlab than al-Thakana because residents in the latter already have relatively high access to services. Similarly, social cohesion interventions are likely to be more effective in al-Thakana than Sheitat because of local grievances driving frictions among residents in al-Thakana.

While evidence and programme learning from other contexts can provide useful insights, they should be tailored to support hyper-local programming, addressing the drivers of violent extremism and key resilience factors in each location.

Ensuring a multidimensional approach

Tailoring programming to local contexts does not preclude the importance of ensuring targeted interventions are set within a wider, more holistic response to violent extremism. Here, again, the fundamental challenge is how to generate measurable effect in addressing the array of factors that can fuel violent extremism – and to do so amid competing donor priorities and limited resources.

Layering interventions, operating from multiple programmatic directions, and coordinating approaches among international and local actors is more likely to achieve impact. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the threat, it is important for programme design to be flexible and create space for implementers to

355 Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, '**Interventions Targeting Youth Engagement: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities**' (The Hague, February 2021), accessed July 24, 2022.

356 Amy Jane Gielen, '**Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?**' *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1149-1167, accessed July 24, 2022.

experiment with novel approaches. Successful interventions can then be scaled up, while avoiding cookie-cutter solutions.

7.2 Considerations for PCVE in northeast Syria

The range of ongoing interventions at the individual, community, and structural levels in northeast Syria provide a foundation from which to build a more coherent and multi-dimensional PCVE approach. Based on our research, we offer considerations for international donors to inform PCVE programming.

- **Exercise caution with PCVE framing**. Vulnerable groups in northeast Syria (and elsewhere) risk further stigmatisation, marginalisation or even targeting and arrest if associated with violent extremism. Avoid framing interventions as PCVE related, in order to avoid stigmatisation or potentially drawing the attention of Daesh or other malevolent actors.

- **Adopt a hyper-localised approach**. Factors driving violent extremism and reinforcing resilience are often highly local, and programming should reflect variations in local contexts. Develop approaches that are bespoke to the dynamics, grievances, and sources of resilience within target communities.

- **Support flexible funding mechanisms**. Flexible, adaptive funding can enable implementers to test and adjust programming to respond to shifting local contexts, and quickly scale up where they achieve success. Pooling funding among multiple donors in joint mechanisms also could improve coordination, leverage complementary programming, and advance shared PCVE objectives.

- **Enable longer programme cycles**. Longer term funding is critical for PCVE initiatives, as it takes time to achieve durable success. Implementers need financial stability to plan and adapt interventions over time. Investing in local communities by committing assistance over longer periods is likely to yield more sustainable contributions to community resilience.

- **Identify entry points for engagement and quick wins**. To gain participant and community trust, implementers should identify quick wins to demonstrate progress and commitment at the onset of programming. Entry points and quick wins will differ by community and target group, but could include early recovery or rehabilitation projects, non-formal educational support, and sporting or cultural activities that foster positive local perceptions of programme objectives and build relationships, paving the way for longer-term programming to strengthen resilience against violent extremism.

- **Ensure women and girls remain central to PCVE programming**. Building resilience against violent extremism among women and girls is as important as targeting men and boys. It also is critical to address the gender-specific impacts of violent extremism on women and girls, including by involving them directly in design and delivery of interventions tailored to their needs. Engaging females may create opportunities to leverage their potential as positive influences on male relatives. Outreach among women and girls must be handled carefully, to reduce the risk of reprisals from extremist actors or aggravating perceptions of donor 'meddling'.

- **Balance PCVE at individual and community levels with efforts to address the structural drivers of violent extremism**. Psychosocial support, vocational training, livelihoods

interventions, or social cohesion programming are important counters to violent extremism. However, their impact is diminished if the structural or contextual drivers of radicalisation and armed violence – such as economic stress, lack of services, weak or repressive governance, and political or economic marginalisation – remain unaddressed.

PCVE and education: supporting and empowering adolescents

The findings of this study align with other research indicating that educational programming – both formal and non-formal – can advance PCVE objectives through development of adolescent critical thinking skills, support for their wellbeing, and expansion of their future prospects. In a 2018 policy brief, UNESCO pointed to growing recognition of education's contribution toward preventing violent extremism, while noting the general lack of evidence. To help fill the gap, UNESCO published a comparative analysis of 32 case studies, concluding that "education has a significant role to play in the prevention of violent extremism".[357]

In her research on child recruitment into NSAGs in Syria, Revkin identifies a link between poor education and joining armed groups, though she points out that increased exposure to malign influences outside school is as much a factor as gaps in learning.[358] The International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) also highlights education's role in strengthening resilience against potential drivers of violent extremism, including by promoting inclusion, building social cohesion, supporting emotional development, and developing engaged citizens:

Whilst alone not necessarily sufficient for removing the threat of violent extremism, [education] can help to contribute to the promotion of peaceful, equitable societies, and enabling environments where children and young people feel able to express their views, grapple with complex issues, and find meaningful opportunities to engage with society and with their communities.[359]

Our research reinforces the importance for PCVE programming among adolescents to centre on approaches that support this vulnerable and traumatised population:

- **Adopt a 'whole child' approach.** It is vital to address the ecosystem surrounding the child, rather than tackling a child's needs in isolation. Parents and caregivers as well as teachers and educators must have sufficient resources to support adolescents and help strengthen their resilience. Supporting the community around the child also presents an opportunity to bring together the traditionally siloed fields of education, child protection, and social cohesion programming.

- **Mainstream psychosocial support**. Significant mental health challenges and high levels of trauma undermine the resilience of adolescents. Adverse childhood experiences are linked to an array of negative outcomes, including vulnerability to engagement in violence or violent extremism.[360] However, support for adolescent mental health remains limited in northeast Syria. Only one-fifth (21%) of adult interviewees noted availability of psychosocial or other forms of mental health support to adolescents, highlighting a critical programming gap. Integrating psychosocial support into adolescent programming will help reinforce the success of interventions among this age group.

357 UNESCO, '**Preventing violent extremism through education: effective activities and impact; policy brief**' (2018), accessed July 24, 2022.

358 Revkin, '**"I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"**'.

359 Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, '**INEE Thematic Paper: Preventing Violent Extremism**', September 28, 2017, accessed July 24, 2022.

360 Barker and Riley, '**The Role of Trauma and Mental Health in Violent Extremism**'.

- **Design programming that empowers and gives agency to adolescents**. Throughout this study, those working with adolescents reiterated the importance of empowering this age group and giving them a voice in activities geared toward them, in order to build self-confidence, exercise independent decision-making, and demonstrate their capacity to control outcomes. A participatory approach to intervention design can increase the likelihood that programming will be age- and gender-conscious and tailored to the needs of local adolescents.

- **Improve cognitive resources and abilities**. Interviewees reiterated the need to bridge education gaps caused by a decade of conflict and displacement. Raising the educational level among Syrian adolescents who have lost years of schooling not only benefits their wellbeing and future prospects but helps support PCVE objectives by strengthening the cognitive resources that enable adolescents to evaluate their choices and weigh the consequences of their actions. Programming can be advanced through both formal and non-formal educational activities.

- **Foster connections among adolescents to enhance a sense of community and shared experience**. Strong connections with family members and peers are an important determinant of adolescent attitudes and behaviour – in both positive and negative ways. Programming that brings together adolescents from different backgrounds or experiences of the conflict can help create a positive and safe space for social interaction. This may allow more vulnerable adolescents to become part of a community and increase resilience to adverse life influences.

- **Cultivate opportunities to mitigate the drive for revenge**. The desire for revenge emerged in our field research as a potential driver of violence or violent extremism in northeast Syria. Interventions to address grievances that may fuel revenge could help reduce the risk of violence. These could include supporting political or military engagement with local communities, encouraging greater restraint by the SDF and other security forces, or enabling reconciliation and reintegration projects.

Contextual considerations for programming in northeast Syria

Some additional context-specific considerations emerged from our research that may support targeted interventions in northeast Syria:

- **Close the programming gap in Deir ez-Zor**: The availability of donor-funded programming and services for adolescents is higher in Raqqa than in Deir ez-Zor, likely due to the greater concentration of donor resources in Raqqa and access and security constraints in Deir ez-Zor. Uneven access to services and unequal distribution of aid heighten local frustrations with the AANES and international donors.[361] An opportunity exists to engage local communities in Deir ez-Zor, and to build resilience, through broader and more sustained investment.

- **Offer programming that meets adolescent interests**: Activities geared toward adolescents are limited, and participation varies by age and gender. Adolescents surveyed cited participation in religious (50%),[362] sports (46%), and learning

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361   COAR Global, **'Countering Violent Extremism'**.

362   'Religious activities' were broadly defined in the survey as including attendance at Friday prayers, listening to religious sermons, learning the Qur'an, and so on.

support (37%)[363] activities at least once per week. Participation in creative activities or vocational training was lower (13% and 8%, respectively), due in part to their limited availability. Adolescent survey respondents and workshop participants expressed significant interest in more educational support and sports activities, highlighting useful entry points for local programming. There also was a notable degree of support for psychosocial support and other forms of awareness raising or dialogue sessions among both adolescents and adults interviewed.

The importance of going beyond formal schooling

Some experts suggest that donors and implementers should move beyond a focus on traditional academic content (i.e. literacy and maths) and provide broader forms of education that improve adolescents' cognitive resources. Darden argues that:

> Introducing critical thinking and media literacy skills into school curricula is also seen as an important way to reduce the vulnerability of youth to propaganda. Efforts to teach youth why violent extremism is wrong are seen as one of the most effective measures to prevent terrorism.[364]

Writing on the role of education in the prevention of violent extremism, Samantha de Silva argues that:

> The focus of interventions with youth have to look beyond just increasing the number of years of schooling. A qualitative overhaul in the system, focusing on fostering citizenship and wider behaviour change is required.[365]

She explains this could be achieved by not only focusing on the school curriculum

but also on activities that go beyond the classroom.[366]

While most of the respondents in our field research expressed support for formal education activities, only a limited number indicated openness to non-formal education support. This likely is due to a lack of familiarity with or availability of non-formal education.

7.3 Considerations for further research

Our research aims to deepen insight on the impact of conflict and violent extremism on adolescents in northeast Syria, and to better understand how these experiences may link to support for or resilience against future violence. Gaps remain, and we recommend donors consider further research on a range of relevant issues, including:

- **Current Daesh recruitment patterns**. Much of the available data is speculative about the methods, frequency, and scale of this phenomenon. Additional research is needed on current recruitment patterns. This likely would require engaging with more sensitive respondent groups with direct knowledge of Daesh's recruitment activities, such as AANES security forces and returnees from al-Hol camp.

- **Reintegration of adolescent returnees from al-Hol camp**. There is a dearth of evidence on adolescent IDPs returning to their areas of origin through reintegration deals between the AANES and tribal leaders. Bearing in mind access constraints, more data is needed on returnees' experiences of reintegration, the challenges

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363 'Learning support' was broadly defined in the survey as including all non-formal education activities, such as literacy courses, remedial and catch-up classes, accelerated-learning programmes, and so on.

364 Darden, '**Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth**'.

365 Samantha de Silva, '**Role of Education in Preventing Violent Extremism**' World Bank, 2017, accessed September 4, 2022.

366 Ibid.; see also Harriet Allan et al., '**Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review**', RUSI, January 1, 2015.

they face, coping mechanisms they employ, and their attitudes and perceptions.

- **Adolescent youth in detention settings**. Many adolescents continue to languish in SDF-controlled detention facilities based on perceived affiliation with or support for Daesh. An early 2022 Daesh attack on a detention facility in al-Hasakeh highlights the risks to this vulnerable group.[367] Access to youth detainees is limited, and details are sparse on the conditions and challenges they face. Further research among this group – with focused attention on factors shaping potential support for violent extremism – will enable targeting programming for this at-risk population.

- **The link between economic stress and support for violent extremism**. Research examining the impact of the economic crisis in northeast Syria on adolescents' current and future trajectories, with targeted programmatic recommendations and associated funding, could help to improve economic outcomes for adolescents as they enter the labour market – thus building resilience against violent extremism.

- **The impact of conflict trauma on adolescents**. Adolescents growing up in former Daesh-held territory require specialised psychosocial support to address trauma associated with experiences of armed conflict and violent extremism. Further research is required to understand the link between conflict trauma and potential future violence among adolescents, and to develop and test interventions that strengthen resilience.[368]

367 Martin Chulov, "Hundreds of boys 'human shields' in Islamic State prison breakout", *The Guardian*, 24 January 2022.

368 XCEPT research led by King's College London explores the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, including study of the impact of conflict trauma on civilian and armed actors.

Annex: Survey Methodology

This annex provides further details on methodology and quality assurance for the face-to-face household survey among 514 adolescents in six northeast Syria field locations.

Step 1: Household Selection

In the absence of a reliable sample frame for northeast Syria (census data or equivalent), the field team was unable to apply the standard Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) technique[369] in the six selected sites, and instead adopted a bespoke approach.

Each research site was divided into two to five sub-sectors, depending on the location. Data collection was conducted in all sectors to ensure full geographic coverage. Sampling points within these sectors were randomly selected from a pre-defined list, which included the centre of the cluster, its most northern, eastern, southern, and western points, and prominent landmarks such as markets and mosques. One sampling point in a more rural sector of Meshlab was rejected on practical grounds (the households were too scattered); instead, the enumerators randomly selected a residential street in a nearby village as a starting point for sample selection.

From the selected sampling points, the enumerators adopted the 'random walk' technique, which involved spinning a pen to randomly choose an initial direction of travel. They walked in the chosen direction to the edge of the site (a neighborhood or village boundary), stopping at every third house or dwelling. Enumerators were instructed to select every fifth unit in an apartment block. If the edge of the cluster was reached

before achieving the desired sample size, enumerators were instructed to continue walking in a clockwise direction back towards the sampling point.

Step 2: Respondent Selection

To identify respondents within households, the enumerators relied on a modified Kish grid to randomly select adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18. If the selected individual was unavailable on the first visit, the enumerators scheduled an alternative interview time. If the selected adolescent remained unavailable, the enumerators were instructed to select the next adolescent down in age (in cases where they had randomly selected the youngest in the age range, they were instructed to interview the oldest).

If no one was home, no one in the selected household met the age criteria, or respondents refused to participate, the enumerator replaced the household with the one directly to the right. For reasons of cultural sensitivity, only female enumerators collected data from female respondents in rural areas of eastern Deir ez-Zor; in other survey locations this was not necessary.

Although a margin of error could not be calculated for the full survey, it was calculated for each survey location (Figure 19).

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369 A method of sampling from a finite population in which a size measure is available for each population unit before sampling and where the probability of selecting a unit is proportional to its size.

Figure 19: Survey sample size and margin of error (estimated)

Survey sample size and margin of error (estimated)			
	Site	**Sample size**	**Margin of error (estimated)**
Raqqa City	Meshlab	111	±9.1%
	al-Thakana	95	±9.8%
Deir ez-Zor West	Jizrat al-Buhmeid	75	±11.2%
	Mheimideh	82	±10.5%
Deir ez-Zor East	Baghouz	74	±10.7%
	Sheitat	77	±11.1%
Total		514	NA

Quality Assurance

During survey implementation, field data was checked daily to assess the demographic spread and ensure no major issues arose in survey implementation, such as respondent difficulty in answering questions. Analysis of the data showed some differences in response rates:

- **Gender**: Females were under-represented (45% of total sample), with significant variance depending on location. Only seven households refused consent for the survey to be administered to a female family member. Possible reasons for the disparity could be girls' engagement in educational or livelihood activities outside the home, or their departure from the home due to marriage.

- **Age**: The mean age of the respondents was somewhat higher in Raqqa than in Deir ez-Zor. This is possibly because:

  - Younger respondents in Raqqa City may have been engaged in educational activities outside the home.

  - Older male respondents in Deir ez-Zor may have been in engaged in livelihood activities outside the home.

  - Older female respondents in Deir ez-Zor may have been engaged in educational or livelihood activities outside the home or may have left the home due to marriage.

- **Nonresponse rates**: Response rates were notably lower in Raqqa City than in Deir ez-Zor. This may be due to:

  - 'Research fatigue' among residents of Raqqa, which is a more accessible area for research.

  - Concerns arising from the presence of security forces in the city when the data was collected.

  - Reluctance of displaced families (which are present in higher numbers in Raqqa than elsewhere) to participate.